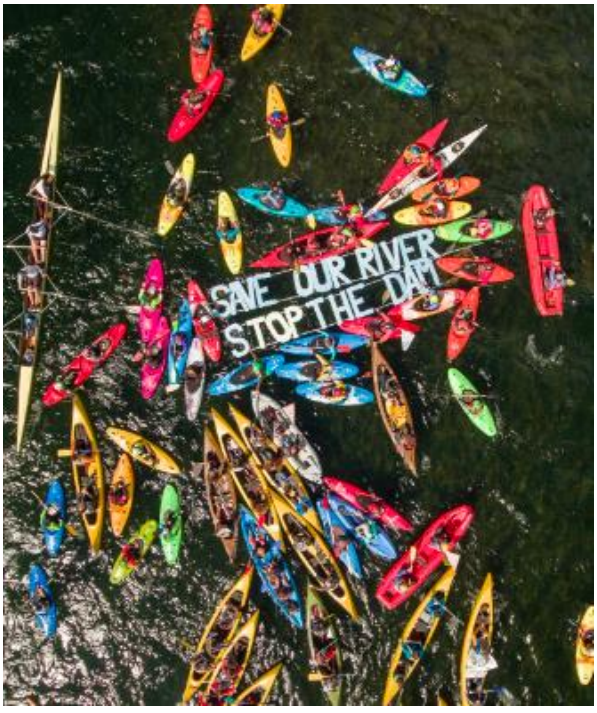
The role of different agents in the discursive struggle surrounding hydropower development –
A explorative case-study on the Balkans



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Abstract

The growing demand for power within a context of climate change and depletion of finite energy sources has spurred the search for alternative, renewable sources of energy. Being framed in (inter)national governance as a green energy source that is essential in the transition towards a sustainable energy system, hydropower has once again gained popularity in the 21st century after having stalled in the 1970s. But while the public discourse frames it as a clean, renewable source of hydropower, hydropower often goes hand in hand with a wave of counterdiscourses and on the ground resistance against the unsustainabilities that come with such projects. One region where such a discursive struggle on hydropower has arisen, is that of the Balkans. This research aims to better understand the discursive struggle that has emerged in relation to hydropower in the Balkans, and the role that various agents play in this struggle to achieve discursive hegemony, by studying this struggle through the Discursive Agency Approach. An explorative case-study has been adopted on the Balkans, for which 11 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with various agents involved in this discursive struggle. The findings suggest that hydropower conflicts can be understood as conflicts on sustainability. By analyzing conflicts on hydropower through the Discursive Agency Approach, this research demonstrates that all agents involved in hydropower debates aim make their understanding of hydropower's sustainability status hegemonic. Thus, to fully understanding such conflicts, attention needs to be paid to agents' different understandings of sustainability, how interventions such as hydropower plants fit within this understanding, and how agents try to make their own position regarding its sustainability function as truth, rather than a simple focus on an intervention's costs and benefits to assess sustainability.

Key words: Hydropower, Hydropower Plant, Balkans, Discursive Agency Approach, Discursive Struggle, Sustainability.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The transition towards renewable energy

The 21st century is characterized by significant challenges in the energy domain. Due to economic development, growing consumption patterns and population growth, a growing demand for energy exists (Ansar, Flyvbjerg, Budzier & Lunn, 2014; Zarfl, Lumsdon, Berlekamp, Tydecks & Tockner, 2015; Hertwich et al., 2016), with the expectation that this demand will have doubled by 2050 (Hertwich et al., 2016). With currently 80% of the energy supply still being derived from fossil fuels, electricity production is closely connected to climate change, causing ±25% of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Kaunda, Kimambo & Nielsen, 2012; Hertwich et al., 2016). Simultaneously, this overdependency on fossil fuels is leading to the depletion of finite energy sources, whereby future shortages may have adverse effects on the global economy (Kaunda et al., 2012; Zarfl et al., 2015).

The growing demand for power within a context of climate change and depletion has spurred the search for alternative sources of energy, whereby renewable energy sources are a main focus point (Zarfl et al., 2015; Tahseen & Karney, 2017). The use of renewable energy is believed to be essential in the transition towards a 'green economy', which builds on *'the control of environmental pollution and the development of environmentally friendly economic activities'* (Chandy, Keenan, Petheram & Shepherd, 2012, p. 117). Against this background, several institutions have set targets to increase renewable energy production. For example, the European Union (EU) aimed to increase their renewable energy production with 20% by 2021, and strives to further improve their renewable energy share until at least 2050 (Kuriqi, Pinheiro, Sordo-Ward, Bejarano & Garrote, 2021). The United Nations (2015) focusses on renewable energy, in addition to other agreements (e.g. Rio+20), in the seventh goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aims to *'ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all'* by 2030 (p. 23).

However, while renewable energy is often believed to be a form of green energy, there is no consensus about what green energy entails (Gibson, Wilman & Laurance, 2017; Rowlands, Parker & Scott, 2002). While it is generally understood as *'electricity generated by more environmental-friendly means'* (Rowlands et al., 2002, p. 112), often derived from renewable resources (e.g. sun, wind, water), different perspectives exist on what makes particular means environmentally friendly and how to measure the environmental impact of renewable energy projects (Rowlands et al., 2002). One energy resource whose sustainable nature remains to this day topic of discussion, is hydroelectric power.

1.2. The complexity of hydroelectric power

Currently, 20% of the global electricity being produced worldwide originates from renewable energy sources, of which the most popular is hydropower: ±80% of this share is being provided by hydropower plants (HPPs) (Zarfl et al., 2015). Hydropower is generated

through what is considered to be a relatively simple process, using the kinetic energy that is freed by falling water; *"in all hydroelectric generating stations, the rushing water drives a turbine, which converts the water's motion into mechanical and electrical energy"* (Egré & Milewski, 2002, p. 1225). But while the process of generating energy through hydropower has been described as relatively easy, reaching agreement on hydropower's status within the energy domain proves to be more difficult.

After having stalled in the 1990s, hydropower has gained popularity again in the 21st century (Flaminio, Piégay & Le Lay, 2021). According to recent research, this new growth period for the dam building industry can be explained by the emergence of a new discourse on climate change and sustainability in relation to hydropower development (Flaminio et al., 2021). In the 21st century, hydropower is often discursively framed within both national and international policy-making as a *'green growth strategy'* (Huber & Joshi, 2015, p. 13), whereby hydropower development is depicted as *'the moral alternative to fuel-based electricity'* due to its clean, affordable character (Fletcher, 2010, p. 5). Underlying narratives, called storylines, of this discourse rely on the comparison of hydropower with other energy sources, both conventional and renewable, pointing out that hydropower development would come with specific advantages: wide, consistent availability that is not dependent on market fluctuations, low operating and maintenance costs, a long life span, and is deemed to improve local living conditions (Liu, Zuo, Sun, Zillante & Chen, 2013; Sharma & Awal, 2013; Chala et al., 2019; Nautiyal & Goel, 2020). Also, the storage or reservoir function of hydropower creates the capacity to store electricity for peak load moments, creating a flexibility in the power grid's operation that other electricity sources are unable to provide (since electricity cannot be stored) (Tahseen & Karney, 2017; Nautiyal & Goel, 2020). As such, supporters of this sustainable hydropower discourse, united in a so-called discourse coalition, adhere to storylines arguing that this form of power has the capacity to simultaneously manage growing electricity demands and contribute to climate change mitigation by replacing high-carbon electricity sources (Meng et al., 2020).

At the same time, such a simplified discourse, framing hydropower as 'clean', is increasingly being criticized by discourse coalitions supporting counterdiscourses, who interpret the phenomenon of hydropower development differently (Fletcher, 2010). Williams (2020) speaks of a 'hydropower myth', as it simplifies the complex issue of hydropower development as a 'clean' and 'sustainable' form of development. Similar to other sources described as green energy, much emphasis is put on the idea that hydropower comes with zero GHG emissions (Midilli, Dincer & Rosen, 2007; Kostakis & Sardianou, 2012). However, opponents of the sustainable hydropower discourse argue that only limited evidence exists about whether hydropower projects are able to offset GHG emissions (Huber & Joshi, 2015). As hydropower development depends on the construction of large infrastructures, some scholars (e.g. McCully, 2001) argue that calculations of GHG emissions should take into account emissions that are emitted during the construction period of both the dam and its materials, and how GHG emissions are altered due to a changing natural environment

(McCully, 2001; Fletcher, 2010). Storylines composing such counterdiscourses often refer to other ecological and social costs that come with the construction of HPPs, that cannot be measured by merely looking at GHG emissions (Gibson et al., 2017; Peters et al., 2021), including, among others, deforestation, the fragmentation of river systems, disruption of a river's ecology and hydrology, forced resettlement, changing livelihoods, public health impacts and changing place relations (Zarf et al., 2015; Moran, Lopez, Moore, Müller & Hyndman, 2018; Soukhaphon, Baird & Hogan, 2021). Literature on environmental justice also identifies other types of injustices, pointing to issues of unequal energy access and benefit distribution, lack of consultation, and exclusion of alternative forms of knowledge (Jenkins, McCauley, Heffron, Stephan & Rehner, 2016; Kruger & McCauley, 2020; Wiese, 2020). Considering such alternative ecological and social costs, discourses countering hydropower development raise the question whether benefits are truly outweighing the costs of hydropower development (Moran et al., 2018) and *"whether they* [hydropower dams] *should be considered 'green energy' at all"* (Gibson et al., 2017).

1.3. Hydropower development in the Balkans

Despite the fact that the sustainability of hydropower is questioned, governments and other important hydropower proponents (e.g. the World Bank) continue to equate hydropower development with sustainability (Williams, 2020). But while the public discourse on hydropower presents it as a clean, uncontroversial energy source, it often goes hand in hand with a wave of counterdiscourses and on the ground resistance against the 'unsustainabilities' that come with such hydropower projects (Huber & Joshi, 2015; Del Bene, Scheidel & Temper, 2018). One region that illustrates the persistence of hydropower development within water management and its controversiality is that of the Balkans[1], where a discursive struggle has emerged surrounding the continuing development of hydropower. A discursive struggle can be understood as a struggle over gaining discursive hegemony; all actors involved aim to make others see the nature of the problem in the same way as they do, thereby trying to make their perception of the problem dominant in society (Hajer, 1995). In the case of hydropower development in the Balkans, actors involved in this struggle are trying to make their perspective on hydropower and its development hegemonic in society, hoping to either foster or prevent further hydropower development in the region.

The last decade in the Balkans has been characterized by a 'hydropower tsunami', quadrupling the number of small hydropower plants between the years of 2009 and 2018 (Gallop, Vejnović & Pehchevski, 2019). As of 2020, 1480 HPPs (both small and large) have been constructed in the region, with 108 plants currently being under construction and 3431 HPPs being planned for the future (SavetheBlueHeartofEurope, 2020). The main reasons explaining this trend are (1) Balkan countries' aim to improve electricity security, and (2) EU sustainability

[1] In this study, the Western Balkans include the countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North-Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo.

targets. Most countries in the Western Balkans are considered to be net energy importers, with ±35% of the region's total energy being imported from other countries (Đurašković, Konatar & Radović, 2021). They are currently aiming to reduce their dependency on electricity imports by increasing their domestic electricity production, to fuel economic development of the region (Hoxha, Dzudzevic & Sweeney, 2020; Đurašković et al., 2021). Thereby, in line with the 2009 Renewable Energy Directive (299/28/EC), the Green Deal and other sustainability targets of the European Union aiming to move away from fossil fuels and thereby limit GHG emissions, countries in the Western Balkans need to enable renewable energy sources' development (Gallop et al., 2019; IHA, 2019). With hydropower traditionally playing an important role in the Western Balkan's energy mix (Gallop et al., 2019), and hydropower potential in the region still being largely unexploited (an estimated 80.000 GWh) (IHA, 2019), Balkan governments have emphasized the importance of hydropower development in reaching these goals (Gallop et al., 2019; IHA, 2019).

However, the *'Balkan dam boom'* comes with widespread public opposition and resistance from local communities, environmental activists and non-governmental organizations and scientists supporting counterdiscourses (Pavlakovič, Okanovic, Vasić, Jesic, & Šprajc, 2022; Samurović, 2019). The 'Save the Blue Heart of Europe' campaign (2020) aims to protect what they consider to be *'the most important freshwater hotspot in Europe'*, with Balkan rivers playing an important role in terms of European biodiversity. Besides hydropower's anticipated impacts on the Western Balkans' fragile river ecosystems and 'pristine' landscapes, hydropower construction in the region is also believed to affect the local population's quality of life. Balkan rivers provide essential ecosystem services to the local population, with hydropower development threatening people's livelihoods (e.g. tourism, agriculture, fisheries) and the area's cultural significance (Mubondo & Bezuidenhoudt, 2020; SavetheBlueHeartofEurope, 2020). In some cases, protests against hydropower projects have been highly successful, resulting in the abolishment of the project. Recent examples include the resistance of 'the brave women of Kruščica' in Bosnia-Herzegovina, leading to the court's annulment of permission of the construction of two HPPs on the Kruščica river (Friends of the Earth Europe, 2018), and the commitment of the Albanian government to establish 'Vjosa Wild River National Park', protecting the Vjosa river from future hydropower development (SavetheBlueHeartofEurope, 2022). Simultaneously, such hydropower resistance is met with counterresponses from pro-hydropower advocates, who aim to discredit and silence opposing discourse coalitions; hydropower opponents in the Western Balkans have faced threats, fines and violence from both police and private security (Samurović, 2019; Todorovic, 2019).

1.4. Problem description

The ongoing debate around hydropower's sustainability suggests that the issue so far remains unsettled (Silber-Coats, 2017). While HPPs continue to be constructed worldwide to meet rising energy demands and mitigate climate change, the broader context in which these plants are (to be) constructed, remains relatively unstudied (Mayeda & Boyd, 2020). Scholarly

debate emphasizes the analysis of the true costs and benefits of hydropower development, which results in the emergence of competing narratives on hydropower's sustainability. This suggests that multiple ways exist to make sense of and construct hydropower and its development. However, *'few have considered how this problem is constructed in the context of ongoing struggles in the sites where such projects are being developed'*, with academic literature largely ignoring discursive struggles that emerge in relation to hydropower and its different narratives (Silber-Coats, 2017, p. 602). Considering this struggle over hegemony, hydropower's future development in a country or region is dependent on the relative strength of the different narratives and the actors that promote them (Slee, Whitfield & Whitfield, 2011).

Reports on the continuing hydropower boom in the Western Balkans and the fierce opposition and resistance that comes with this development show that the discursive struggle on hydropower in this region has not been settled. The fact that multiple hydropower projects have been suspended due to successful resistance implies that no discursive closure has been reached (Hajer, 1995; Silber-Coats, 2017), i.e. no stable narrative has been formed that defines the problem while excluding uncertainty and alternative interpretations (Hajer, 1995). So far, the hydropower conflict in the Western Balkans and the discursive struggle that lies at the heart of this conflict remains largely understudied. As such, there is a lack of understanding of the discursive struggles that surround hydropower development in the Western Balkans and the role that various agents play in this struggle over discursive hegemony.

1.5. Research aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to better understand the discursive struggles that have emerged in relation to hydropower in the Western Balkans, and the role that various agents play in this struggle to achieve discursive hegemony. To do so, various discourses on hydropower development and their mobilization will be investigated.

This research thereby aims to create a deeper understanding of the various discourses surrounding hydropower, the actors involved and the strategies they employ to try to reach discursive hegemony with their narrative within the Western Balkans. As Hajer (1995) argues, environmental conflicts should be understood *'as a complex and continuous struggle over the definition and meaning of the environmental problem itself'* (p. 14). It is then important to pay attention to such distinct meanings, in order to mitigate environmental conflicts. Better understanding the continuous discursive struggle surrounding hydropower can then be understood as a first step in finding ways towards a resolution of the conflict. While it is acknowledged that understanding does not immediately solve the conflict, it is crucial in reaching this goal, providing insights in current dissatisfactions, points of consensus between opposing parties and thereby potential ways forward. The generated insights can potentially contribute to broader accepted, more inclusive water policy, fostering the development of more sustainable hydropower in the Western Balkans. To better understand the discursive struggle surrounding hydropower, the findings of this research will be analyzed by using Leipold and Winkel's Discursive Agency Approach.

The following main research question has been formulated based on the problem description and research aim: *How do different agents play a role in the discursive struggle surrounding hydropower in the Western Balkans?*

In order to answer this question, several sub research questions have been formulated:

1. *What are the main storylines of discourse coalitions about hydropower development in the Western Balkans?*
2. *What strategies do discourse coalitions use to (aim to) reach discursive hegemony?*
3. *What explains differences in employed strategies between actors?*

While the first sub question aims to create an overview of the different perspectives on hydropower development in the Western Balkans and the various agents that support these perspectives (i.e. structural context), sub questions two and three aim to provide insight in the various ways in which actors actively try to shape and use these storylines for their own gain (i.e. agency).

To answer these research questions, this study is structured as follows: chapter 2 provides an overview of the existing literature on hydropower development discourses, its resistance and counterresistance. Then, chapter 3 elaborates on how discourse is defined in this study and explains the Discursive Agency Approach. Chapter 4 continues to describe the methodological choices that have been made during this study. After this, chapter 5 sets out the three discourses on hydropower development in the Balkans that have been identified in this study and its supporting agents. Chapter 6 then gives an overview of the various strategies that each discourse coalition employs to make their position on hydropower hegemonic in society. Following, chapter 8 analyzes these findings in relation to the wider discussion that exists around hydropower development as a sustainable energy source. Lastly, chapter 9 aims to answer the research question of this study. Here, it is concluded that hydropower conflicts should be understood as conflicts of sustainability. To fully understand environmental conflicts, attention therefore needs to be paid to agents' different understandings of sustainability, how interventions such as hydropower plants fit within this understanding, and how agents try to make their own position regarding its sustainability function as truth, rather than a simple focus on an intervention's costs and benefits to analyze its sustainability.

2. Literature review

2.1. The resurgence of hydropower in the 21st century

Since the invention of hydropower in the late 19th century, multiple shifts have occurred in how the hydropower industry has been discursively framed (Anshelm & Simon, 2016; Moran, Lopez, Moore, Müller & Hyndman, 2018). Hydropower is generated through a relatively simple process, using the kinetic energy that is freed by falling water; *"`In all hydroelectric generating stations, the rushing water drives a turbine, which converts the water's motion into mechanical and electrical energy"* (Egré & Milewski, 2002, p. 1225). Where hydro turbines were initially used to power theaters and streetlights, from the 1920s onwards, hydropower plants were being built for the main aim of rural electrification (Moran et al., 2018). In this regard, hydropower plants have played an important role in the development of North American and European energy, with many of these plants still operating today at efficiency levels of 80-90% (Egré & Milewski, 2002; Moran et al., 2018). Since the beginning of the 1970s until the early 2000s, a slow shift emerged in which greater caution towards hydropower development became the norm (Anshelm & Simon, 2016; Moran et al., 2018). Growing concerns about the environmental and social consequences of hydropower projects, resulting in massive protests globally, eventually propelled institutions as the World Bank to reduce their funding for hydropower development (Anshelm & Simon, 2016). A huge victory for hydropower opposition came in 2000, when the World Commission of Dams (2000) declared large dams environmentally and socially unsustainable.

Now, in the face of the aforementioned problems of climate change mitigation, energy security and economic development (explained in chapter 1, section 1.1.), hydropower in the 21st century is often being discursively framed as a source of green power (Anshelm & Simon, 2016; Del Bene, Scheidel & Temper, 2018). It is currently believed that the hydropower industry can sufficiently overcome its sustainability concerns (Del Bene et al., 2018). Assertions of hydropower's sustainability are predominantly made at national and international levels, where policies ascribe hydropower a key position in the sustainable energy transition (Atkins & Hope, 2021). As the vice president of the World Bank, Rachel Kyte, states: *"Large hydro is a very big part of the solution for Africa and South Asia and Southeast Asia. I fundamentally believe we have to be involved", [The earlier move out of hydro] "was the wrong message. That was then. This is now. We are back"* (Schneider, 2013). In a similar vein, the congress of the International Hydropower Association had the opening slogan *'We Can Deliver Better Hydro'*, due to better management, governance and technological advancements (Del Bene et al., 2018). Such messages on hydropower, emphasizing its sustainability, differ fundamentally from those used to promote hydropower in the 20th century. Where the reason for hydropower implementation currently is its green nature, in the 20th century it was its role as a tool for achieving economic development (Atkins & Hope, 2021).

With hydropower being presented in national and international environmental governance as the way forward to reconcile the seemingly contradicting goals of reducing carbon emissions and economic development, a new wave of hydropower projects and financing has become visible in the first two decades of the 21st century (Anshelm & Simon, 2016; Del Bene et al., 2018). Today, 17% of the global electricity production is generated by the hydropower industry (Kuriqi et al., 2021). An upsurge in hydropower development has been especially visible since 2004, with hydropower its potential benefits increasingly being recognized in emerging markets and less developed countries (World Energy Council, 2015; Anshelm & Simon, 2016; Moran et al., 2018). So, today, *'hydropower continues to be a primary part of numerous states' energy matrices'* (Atkins & Hope, 2021, p. 249), with 32 countries obtaining over 80% of their domestic electricity from hydropower (e.g. Brazil (84%), Norway (98%), and Iceland (80%)) (Sipahutar, Bernas & Imanuddin, 2013; Atkins & Hope, 2021). However, as the next sections will show, the assumed sustainability of hydropower is not as straightforward as governments, corporations and other hydropower proponents often present it to be.

2.2. The (un)sustainability of hydropower

Despite the wide application of the term 'sustainability' in the last decades, there exists no universally accepted, consistent definition of what sustainability entails (Moore, Mascarenhas, Bain & Straus, 2017; Tahseen & Karney, 2017). The most commonly used definition of sustainability is the one cited in the Brundtland report of the World Commission of Environment and Development (WCED), tying sustainability and development together: *"Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"* (1987, p. 41). Waseem & Kota (2017) argue that most of the sustainability definitions are *'global, non-measurable and ambiguous'* (p. 361), making it difficult to assess sustainability performance. Resultingly, there exists a broad variety of approaches, frameworks and models to assess sustainable practices (Tahseen & Karney, 2017). This is also the case for hydropower development; while almost all countries now require an impact assessment on new hydropower projects prior to its construction (Tahseen & Karney, 2017), a standard sustainability assessment for hydropower projects remains non-existent (Tahseen & Karney, 2017; Zhang et al., 2020; Zhang, Ma & Zhao, 2021). Instead, multiple frameworks and guidelines exist to determine the sustainability of hydropower developments. Well-known examples include the Low Impact Hydropower Certification scheme developed by the Low Impact Hydropower Institute (LIHI), the Green Hydropower Certification scheme of the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (EAWAG) and the Sustainability Assessment Protocol released by the International Hydropower Association (IHA) (Liu, Zuo, Sun, Zillante & Chen, 2013; Zhang et al., 2020). The first two schemes emphasize the environmental impacts of hydropower projects, while the protocol of the IHA also focusses on social aspects (Liu et al., 2013).

2.2.1. The advantages of hydropower

Of all renewable energy sources, hydropower is often presented in environmental policies as the most reliable, efficient and sustainable option (Chala, Ma'Arof & Sharma, 2019; Shaktawat & Vadhera, 2020). It has been associated with various environmental, social and economic benefits, explaining its growing popularity as an energy source (Chala et al., 2019). The most prominent argumentation in favor of hydropower's sustainability used in environmental governance is that hydropower as an energy source can aid in the mitigation of climate change, as it would be able to offset emissions and pollutants that are commonly associated with other energy sources (Tahseen & Karney, 2017; Shaktawat & Vadhera, 2020). Additionally, when comparing hydropower with other energy sources, both conventional and renewable, it is considered to come with specific advantages: wide, consistent availability that is not dependent on market fluctuations, low operating and maintenance costs and a long life span, and improved local living conditions (Liu et al., 2013; Sharma & Awal, 2013; Chala et al., 2019; Nautiyal & Goel, 2020). While the main objective of hydropower projects is power generation, many projects are promoted as multifunctional, thus contributing to irrigation, flood control, fisheries and tourism (Tahseen & Karney, 2017; Chala et al., 2019; Nautiyal & Goel, 2020). At the same time, hydropower development can contribute to economic development by leading to investments in infrastructure, communications and skill building and the expansion of employment opportunities (Tahseen & Karney, 2017). Lastly, hydropower would create a certain level of flexibility in electricity production and supply (Egré & Milewski, 2002; Liu et al., 2013). Since electricity cannot be stored, an increase in demand needs to be immediately met with an increase in supply (Egré & Milewski, 2002). The storage, or reservoir, function of hydropower could create the capacity to store electricity for peak load moments, leading to a flexibility in the power grid its operation that other electricity sources are unable to provide (Tahseen & Karney, 2017; Nautiyal & Goel, 2020).

2.2.2. The externalities of hydropower

But while the aforementioned benefits are often mentioned in global policies to promote hydropower construction, many social and environmental scientists (e.g. Zhang et al., 2021) continue to question the sustainability of hydropower (Atkins & Hope, 2021). They argue that *'few hydropower projects are absolutely or perfectly sustainable'* (Zhang et al., 2021, p. 1), thereby criticizing the simplified discourse on hydropower present in environmental governance. From a macro perspective, hydropower development would seem ultimately beneficial; contributing to the replacement of fossil energy, reducing environmental pollution, improving energy supplies and contributing to sustainable development (Chang, Liu & Zhou, 2010; Li, Chen, Fan & Cheng, 2018). Nevertheless, at the regional level, hydropower development is considered to come with various negative externalities (Li et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2021). As Tahseen & Karney (2017) state: *"It is often impossible to completely eliminate or fully control the adverse influences on local ecosystems"* (p. 226). HPPs would have direct impacts on the environment and climate (Bunea, Ciocan, Oprina, Băran & Băbuţanu, 2010), which Botelho, Ferreira, Lima, Pinto & Sousa (2017) have

categorized into four categories: (1) Fauna, (2) Flora, (3) Landscape, and (4) Historical remains. Such impacts include deforestation, aquatic and terrestrial biodiversity limitation, the fragmentation of river systems, the altering of water quality, water flow, temperature regimes and sediment transfers, the disruption of a river's ecology and hydrology, and the impediment of free movement of aquatic organisms (Zarfl et al., 2015; Moran et al., 2018; Soukhaphon, Baird & Hogan, 2021). The most pronounced example of the latter, is the influence of hydropower construction on fish populations (Zdankus, Vaikasas & Sabas, 2008). Fish communities are known to decrease after the construction of a HPP, since impoundments hinder their migration and turbines *'can cause injury and mortality due to blade strike, grinding, rapid pressure fluctuations, cavitation, shear stress and turbulence'* (Vowles, Karlsson, Uzunova & Kemp, 2014, p. 152). In this light, it is likely that hydropower development intensifies conflict between the objectives of the SDGs, specifically between SDG 7 (i.e. 'affordable and clean energy') and SDG 14 (i.e. 'life below water') (Kuriqi et al., 2021).

In the end, when environmental impacts are not properly assessed before construction, they can eventually induce negative social and economic implications (Botelho et al., 2017). In terms of socio-economic impacts, hydropower projects are perceived as destroyers of arable land, scenic land and residential areas, thereby influencing food systems and food security, and potentially causing replacement of local communities (Moran et al., 2018; Soukhaphon et al., 2021). Hydropower projects have also been associated with detrimental health impacts (e.g. mental health issues, infectious diseases) (McDonald, Bosshard & Brewer, 2008; Del Bene et al., 2018; Phung et al., 2021) and loss of access to water for agriculture and drinking (Soukhaphon et al., 2021). Simultaneously, hydropower construction can negatively impact recreational and economic activities, such as tourism, fishing and irrigation, thereby changing local livelihoods (Sayan, 2019). In this regard, the popular hydropower rhetoric then promises local development, while in practice, its construction may actually have the opposite effect *'by deteriorating the existing socio-economic status of relevant localities'* (Reddy, Uitto, Frans & Matin,2006; Sayan, 2019, p. 4).

The environmental and energy justice literature adds to the utilitarian framing that is prominent in sustainability assessments, i.e. analyzing the benefits and costs. Its focus is at the intersection between social justice and environmental sustainability, whereby energy justice focusses specifically on energy systems, including hydropower (Kruger & McCauley, 2020). By studying the core tenets of distributive, procedural and recognition justice, additional key issues, or injustices, come to light that would influence hydropower's sustainability (Jenkins, McCauley, Heffron, Stephan & Rehner, 2016). Important issues include: unequal energy access and geographical unevenness of benefits and externalities (e.g. Kruger & McCauley, 2020), disempowerment, lack of information disclosure or mere consultation rather than meaningful involvement of affected communities in decision-making (e.g. Wiese, 2020), exclusion of alternative forms of knowledge (e.g. Jenkins et al., 2016) and reduced living standards, insufficient compensation and no accountability for this on the side of the hydropower developer (e.g. Zhao, Wu & Qi, 2020).

2.2.3. Small-Scale versus Large-Scale Hydropower

Asserting the sustainability of hydropower becomes even more complex when considering the debate on small-scale hydropower and large-scale hydropower. In line with other energy technologies, the most common way to categorize hydropower projects is by size categories[2], so its installed capacity (World Energy Council, 2015) – alternatives are by head (the vertical height difference of the water level below and above the dam) or by purpose (single- or multi-purpose) (Egré & Milewski, 2002; IPCC, 2012). Since the resurgence of hydropower in the 21st century, emphasis has been placed on the development of small-scale HPPs; small-scale hydropower projects are now promoted in global policy and national agendas as *'sustainable alternatives to fossil sources and large-scale dams'* (Sayan, 2019, p. 4). It is believed that small-scale hydropower comes with less severe environmental, social and economic impacts than large-scale hydropower (Yah, Oumer & Idris, 2017; Chala et al., 2019; Nautiyal & Goel, 2020). This reasoning is based on several assumptions, such as that SSH creates less GHG emissions (Yah et al., 2017), does not cause significant displacement and make smaller alterations to the environment and water flow compared to large-scale hydropower (Sayan, 2019).

However, such an understanding of small-scale hydropower as automatically sustainable is based on an uncritical "small is beautiful" ideology (Kaunda et al., 2012; Del Bene et al., 2018); its promotion as clean and environment-friendly would follow a similar optimism once used in the portrayal of large dams (Abbasi & Abbasi, 2011; Sayan, 2019). As Abbasi and Abbasi (2011) point out: "*No scientific basis is given for the belief; the only apparent logic behind the presupposition is that since an SHS* [authors' abbreviation for small-scale hydropower] *is a 'small-scale' system, the adverse impacts it may cause will also be proportionately small"* (p. 2139). In other words, there exists no direct link between size categories of hydropower projects and their particular characteristics (Egré & Milewski, 2002; IPCC, 2012). For this reason, the IPCC (2012) states in their Special Report on Renewable Energy that, while classifying hydropower projects based on scale is simple in terms of administration, it is also 'arbitrary'; "*General concepts like 'small' or 'large' are no technically or scientifically rigorous indicator of impacts, economics or characteristics"* (p. 80). For example, the question can be raised whether a system of multiple small HPPs within a river is more sustainable than one large, single HPP, when both generate the same amount of electricity (Egré & Milewski, 2002; Kaunda et al., 2012). In China, the overdevelopment of small HPPs has led to the construction of large, multiple-cascade systems, which have been associated with various social and environmental impacts (Hennig & Harlan, 2018).

In the end, it is thus more useful to assess hydropower projects' sustainability by looking at its specific site location and characteristics instead of making generalized comments

[2] Size categories differ per country or groups of countries, which means that a variety of categories exists globally (IPCC, 2012; Nautiyal & Goel, 2020), and resultingly, no international consensus exists about when a HPP is to be considered 'small' or 'large' (Kaunda et al., 2012; Nautiyal & Goel, 2020). Definitions setting the upper limit of power generation of small-scale HPPs range from 5 MW to 50 MW (Nautiyal & Goel, 2020), but for many countries, the upper limit for small-scale hydropower is set at 10 MW, with hydropower projects above this limit being considered large-scale (Kaunda et al., 2012).

based on categorization (Egré & Milewski, 2002; IPCC, 2012). This is in line with the reasoning of Botelho et al. (2017), Egré and Milewski (2002), Tahseen and Karney (2017) and others, who state that the impacts of hydropower development differ per case. This means that environmental and socio-economic impacts and injustices need to be evaluated per individual project. For this reason, *'it is invariably challenging to make generalized comments regarding the impact of hydropower development on surrounding environment'* (Tahseen & Karney, 2017, p. 226).

2.3. Resistance against hydropower development

Two decades after its publication, *'the cautions laid out in the WCD report seems to have been drowned out and forgotten in international development politics, amidst a new flurry of excitement and investment in large-scale hydropower'* and the promotion of small-scale hydropower in global policy (Del Bene et al., 2018, p. 620). But while the popular discourse on hydropower presents it as a clean, uncontroversial energy source, the new hydropower surge goes hand in hand with a new wave of on the ground resistance against the 'unsustainabilities' that come with such hydropower projects (Huber & Joshi, 2015; Del Bene et al., 2018). As Atkins and Hope (2021) point out, hydropower projects often come *'to represent a disconnection between the national level discourse of 'green' energy and the extensive impacts experienced by those in living near the site of construction'* (p. 258). Many hydropower plants are planned or constructed in regions that are considered to be of ecological, economic and cultural importance, such as the Amazon (e.g. Randell & Klein, 2021), the Mekong river (e.g. Green & Baird, 2020), the Himalayas (e.g. Dukpa, Joshi & Boelens, 2019) and the Balkan region (e.g. Pavlakovič et al., 2022). Resultingly, the construction of both large- and small-scale hydropower has provoked conflicts around the world. Indigenous communities especially take up a prominent role in many conflicts related to hydropower, due to the fact that hydropower projects are often taking place in indigenous territories (Huber & Joshi, 2015; Del Bene et al., 2018). Whereas tribal people in India only account for 8% of the population, they make up 40-50% of those suffering from displacement due to hydropower and other development projects (Survival and International, 2010).

Such conflicts around hydropower infrastructures (can) occur for a broad variety of reasons; main concerns include forced displacement, rehabilitation and insufficient compensation (Yeophantong, 2014), place attachment and people their sacred values and meanings attached to that place (Dukpa et al., 2018), aesthetic concerns (Anshelm & Simon, 2016), identity issues (Yaka, 2017), fear of cultural erosion and the loss of spiritual-ecological heritage (Huber, Bolding & Joshi, 2013), loss of access to natural resources and livelihood concerns (Dukpa et al., 2019). For the extractive and energy sectors, Escobar (2006) broadly summarizes the main motives for resisting projects in three categories, entailing concerns about the impact on (1) the local ecology, (2) the local economy, and (3) culture. Studies on hydropower resistance and energy justice add a fourth motive for opposing hydropower development, which is related to decision-making processes (Mayeda & Boyd, 2020). Resistance is not necessarily (only) about the negative environmental, socio-economic and

cultural impacts associated with hydropower projects, but also about the lack of power, consultation and inclusion in decision-making processes (Mayeda & Boyd, 2020; Pérez & Rasch, 2020). Despite the fact that public acceptance (i.e. free, prior and informed consent) is a key requirement for ethical hydropower development within international policy, there is often no or a limited role reserved for affected communities (Moran et al., 2018; Mayeda & Boyd, 2020). Since gaining public acceptance is a timely process, thereby negatively influencing the planning process and profits of the projects, inclusion and debate with affected community members in the hydropower development process is often avoided by proponents of such projects (Huber & Joshi, 2015; Mayeda & Boyd, 2020). Instead, information sharing is often experienced as insufficient by those affected by the project (Mayeda & Boyd, 2020), with information on hydropower projects only becoming public after demonstrations and protests by civil society (Diduck, Sinclair, Pratap & Hostetler, 2007), or planning and intentions of hydropower development only becoming known to the public after construction has already started (Islar, 2012). Siciliano, Urban, Kim and Lonn (2015) describe the consultation process prior to the construction of the Kamchay dam in Cambodia as *'patchy and ad-hoc with little participation'* (p. 10). Resultingly, decision-making often overlooks local priorities, being driven by the interests of the industrial sector (Moran et al., 2018).

Despite the multitude of reasons that affected communities can have for resisting hydropower construction, it is important to recognize that local communities are not 'monolithic wholes'; their homogeneity should be emphasized in this regard. Within a community, *'different perspectives about hydropower projects persist, often resulting in loss of trust or violent conflicts'* (Hernando-Arrese & Rasch, 2022, p. 8). Studies as the ones of Dukpa et al. (2018), Maher (2019) and Hernando-Arrese & Rasch (2022) illustrate how not all individuals have the same perception regarding hydropower development; part of the community believes that hydropower development comes with development, *'translating to 'free-electricity', 'employment-opportunities', 'business-expansion' 'monetary compensations', and 'undertaking-of-social-services'*, while others express concerns in relation to the destruction of their place and environment (Dupka et al., 2018, p. 67). This diversity could be partly explained by the fact that some community members might gain personally from a project, for example by selling their land or through employment opportunities (Huber & Joshi, 2015). Maher (2019) adds to this a third group, who engages in what he calls 'pragmatic community resistance'; this group simultaneously resists a hydropower projects in their area, while also accepting benefits from the hydropower development company. This follows the argumentation of Hensengerth (2017) that the presence of resistance does not necessarily mean total opposition, as *'the potential benefits they may bring to the community if properly implemented are also taken into consideration'* (p. 108). Instead, resistance may be understood as a means to call for more inclusion and recognition (Hensengerth, 2017); reality is more complicated than simple resistance or acceptance of hydropower development (Maher, 2019).

At the same time, such categories are not homogenous in nature either, since individuals can adhere to various reasons for either accepting or resisting hydropower projects

(Yaka, 2016; Hernando-Arrese & Rasch, 2022). The study of Hernando-Arrese & Rasch (2022) shows how some community leaders opposed hydropower development in their area because of its representation of capitalistic expansion, while others opposed the asymmetry in power relations that came with such a project. Also, there can be considerable difference between men and women in how they frame their opposition towards hydropower development (Yaka, 2017). In the Eastern Black Sea region, men follow discourses that *'merge insights of global warming with theories of imperial/hegemonic struggles between world powers on water*', whereby the move towards sustainable energy production is believed to be a way to appropriate fresh water from the region. Women, on the other hand, frame their opposition by referring to bodily practices that create an interconnectedness with the river, making their commitment to activism more aggressive and determined (Yaka, 2017). The recognition that measures of resistance can differ between genders, is important, taking into account that *'the boldness of and tenacity of countless women who resist has historically been overlooked, obscured and erased'* (Ey, 2021, p. 401), ignoring the political agency that women hold (Deonandan & Tatham, 2016; Ey, 2021).

Despite the fact that affected communities are often excluded from the decision-making process, hydropower projects are often met with unprecedented voice and agency from these communities (Huber & Joshi, 2015). The history of hydropower development is characterized by fierce resistance from affected communities, environmental non-governmental organizations and environmental activists. Many anti-hydropower social movements have occurred to counter the development and construction of HPPs; protested projects for example include the Rathon Chu Hydro Electric Project in India (e.g. Dukpa et al., 2018), the Ralco dam in Chile (e.g. Hernando-Arrese & Rasch, 2022) and the Belo Monte project in Brazil (e.g. Atkins & Hope, 2021). Huber and Joshi (2015) describe such anti-dam struggles as *'unprecedented expressions of subaltern political agency'* (p. 16), meaning that resistance can thus be understood as (an expression of) agency.

To express their political agency and counter hydropower projects, affected communities employ a broad variety of strategies, that are mostly of a collective, non-violent nature (Huber & Joshi, 2015; Del Bene et al., 2018). Contestation of hydropower projects can be done through both institutional and extra-institutional means (Antadze & Gujaraidze, 2021). Institutional means *'include actions employed through institutional channels of communication and deliberation'*, which entails for example lobbying, litigation and the public participation in EIA processes (Antadze & Gujaraidze, 2021, p. 2). Examples can be found in Costa Rica and Chile, where indigenous people and civil society actors have successfully resisted hydropower construction by using the legal channels related to free, prior and informed consent and the company's Environmental Impact Assessment (Silva, 2016; Feoli, 2018; Delina, 2020). In Thailand, lawsuits have been filed by Thai villagers against the Thai government in relation to the Xayaburi Dam and the Pak Beng dam (Yong, 2019). Extra-institutional means are then *'actions that fall outside of institutional channels of communication'* (Antadze & Gujaraidze, 2021, p. 2). These means include protests, boycotts, strikes or vandalism, but can also take more creative forms. For example, Antadze and

Gujaraidze (2021) illustrate *'how place-based agency, in the form of employing traditional rituals, contributes to building and strengthening the anti-dam movement'* against the Khudoni HPP in Georgia (p. 1). In Brazil, the women affected by the Baixo Iguaçu Hydropower dam use embroidery as a means of their emotional, daily and embodied resistance, thereby employing art as a political strategy to build counter-hegemonic narratives to hydropower (Rusansky, 2020). Extra-institutional means become necessary when official, institutional channels are not sufficient or are actively being undermined by hydropower proponents, and can therefore be considered unjust (Huber & Joshi, 2015; Antadze & Gujaraidze, 2021). The study of Diduck, Pratap, Sinclair and Deane (2013) illustrates how protest actions were experienced by local residents as the only means of getting their concerns heard. This is in line with the reasoning of Butler (2016), who argues: *"Sometimes a mobilization happens precisely in order to create or keep the platform for political expression itself"* (pp. 12-13).

In the end, protests against hydropower can be highly successful, resulting in the abolishment of a hydropower project and/or a paradigm shift within energy policy. For example, in Chile, demonstrations, environmental campaigns and activism against the Ralco dam eventually led to a move away from large hydropower development in the country (Hernando-Arrese & Rasch, 2022). However, as the following section will explain, resistance does not automatically induce change.

2.4. Undermining the resistance: counterresistance

Hydropower proponents are not silent bystanders to such resistance; governments, corporations and other pro-hydropower advocates are considered to possess considerable power to continue hydropower construction in the face of fierce opposition and/or to actively undermine its resistance (Dukpa et al., 2019). The Sardar Sarovar Dam in India is illuminative in this regard: after nearly three decades of resistance against the dam, its construction became completed in 2006 (Dukpa et al., 2019). In many cases, hydropower resistance is met with counterresponses from pro-hydropower advocates, who actively try to discredit and silence the opposition (Narula, 2009; Huber & Joshi, 2015). As Huber, Bolding and Joshi (2013) explain: *"To limit popular resistance and to pave the way for hydropower development, various strategies of depoliticization, manipulation and coercion are employed by a powerful nexus of state actors and private developers, aimed at obscuring the profoundly political dimension of this water infrastructure intervention"* (p. 1). Considering the importance of resistance in causing delay and/or cancellation of hydropower projects throughout the decades, it is not surprising that hydropower proponents would aim to stifle such activism (Huber & Joshi, 2015; Dupka et al., 2018).

The popular discourse on hydropower prominent in environmental politics ties hydropower to green growth and development (Li, 2007; Huber et al., 2013), or so-called "narratives of improvement" (Li, 2007). By placing hydropower (and other forms of resource appropriation for that matter) in a broader development discourse of progression, such controversial projects are legitimized by being presented as a necessary, technical and therefore, non-political intervention (Li, 2007; Huber & Joshi, 2015; Yong, 2019). As Li (2007)

states: *"Questions that are rendered technical are simultaneously rendered nonpolitical"* (p. 7), as hydropower its socio-environmental controversies are ignored and no longer situated in a political context (Huber & Joshi, 2015; Yong, 2019). So, by creating an illusion of neutrality, hydropower proponents would aim to contain political contestation from the start by obscuring its political dimension (Huber et al., 2013; Yong, 2019). This is what Ferguson (1994) refers to as 'antipolitics', whereby *'high-profile development projects taking place under the innocuous guise of neutral and technical missions may in reality provide a vehicle for politically sensitive operations to establish and extend the reach of institutional state power'* (Yong, 2019, p. 37). This means that resistance and counter resistance often entail a debate about forms of modernization and development (Hensengerth, 2017).

By framing hydropower as an apolitical development intervention, hydropower opponents are at risk of becoming the subject of an 'othering' process (Huber et al., 2013). While hydropower projects are portrayed as essential and favorable by pro-hydropower advocates, affected communities and others opposing its construction are depicted as selfish and unreasonable (Antadze & Gujaraidze, 2021). When hydropower is introduced as a necessity, those opposing its implementation may be framed as *'opposing the development of the country'* and therefore as anti-national (Delang & Toro, 2011, p. 591). Due to a fear of ostracization, opponents may then be unwilling to (overtly) resist hydropower construction (Delang & Toro, 2011; Huber et al., 2013; Pérez & Rasch, 2020). As the research of Pérez & Rasch (2020) shows, affected communities may turn to more covert forms of resistance in dangerous environments, whereby *'everyday practices of susrvival became acts of resistance'* through internalization and appropriation (p. 124). Apart from framing opponents as irrational, state actors and others in favor of hydropower also sometimes aim to discursively frame hydropower opponents as dangerous. Environmental groups and affected communities' resistance have been tied to issues of security (i.e. terrorism, rebel groups) by state actors, in an attempt to justify the arrest and questioning of individuals participating in resistance and thereby undermine their demands (Islar, 2012; Delina, 2020).

When such an apolitical discursive framing is not effective in containing hydropower resistance, some hydropower proponents have not been disinclined to use more extreme measures. Corporations and state agencies may turn to indirect and direct forms of violence and repression to silence the opposing parties (McDonald et al. 2008; Blake & Barney, 2018; Global Witness, 2019; Delina, 2020), which so far remains underexposed in both impact assessments and academic studies (Del Bene et al., 2018). As Blake and Barney (2018) state: *"A range of social traumas and coercive actions are associated with infrastructure projects, often overlooked as "normal" or "everyday" part of the development process"* (p. 809). These actions can include intimidation, coercion and forced resettlements (Blake & Barney, 2018), but cases of hydropower resistance have also been associated with criminalization, movement restriction, arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, repressive measures against the press, and some states even sanction disappearance and murder (McDonald et al., 2008; Blake & Barney, 2018; Del Bene et al., 2018). Del Bene et al. (2018) conclude their analysis of dam-related environmental conflicts by stating that while such patterns of violence are often associated

with projects in the extractivist sector, *'such forms of repression, criminalization, violent targeting, and assassinations employed against activists are also common features in the establishment of supposedly "sustainable" large-scale renewable infrastructures'*, including hydropower (Del Bene et al., 2018, p. 629). Islar (2012) describes how 'the Great March of Anatolia' in Turkey, organized by citizens from various regions to raise awareness and protest against various hydropower projects, was prevented from entering the capital. Various cases (e.g. Narula, 2008; Delina, 2020; Rusansky, 2020) illustrate how the state abused its power to execute the arrests, beatings and detention of protestors. A well-known example of state-linked murder is the case of environmental activist Berta Cáceres in Honduras in 2016 (Global Witness, 2019; Delina, 2020). These practices of repression and violence can be understood as systemic practices; incidences are not merely examples of bad management that only occur within corrupt, authoritarian countries, but can also be found in democracies (e.g. Brazil, India and France) (Del Bene et al., 2018).

Such actions of repression and violence target more than mere opposition towards hydropower projects: *"As violent repression targets resistance, it also undermines the emergence of alternative visions, epistemologies, world views, the 'pluriverse'* (Bel Dene et al., 2018, p. 630). The term 'extractivist violence' is used among environmental activists to describe the various strategies of repression that aim to silence alternative understandings of sustainability, again underscoring the importance of furthering the debate on what sustainability means, on the various impacts of 'transitions towards sustainability', and what and for who sustainability aims to sustain (Del Bene et al., 2018).

But instead of preventing or putting an end to resistance, such strategies tend to have the opposite effect (Mouffe, 2005; Huber & Joshi, 2015). Rather than suppressing resistance, anti-politics creates its own resistance; by suppressing the political dimension of hydropower, it will eventually lead to an eruption of this political dimension (Huber et al., 2013). This relates to the argument of Mouffe (2005) that suppressing political antagonisms in society will only exacerbate societal conflict instead of containing it. As Huber and Joshi (2015) notice on the case of the Sikkimese hydropower conflict: *"The use of depoliticizing and coercive strategies to stifle dissent and to maximize the speed of dam construction served to aggravate intrinsic social antagonisms"* (p. 14). This shows the willingness of affected communities to express their political agency and resist hydropower projects, even when this may potentially result in violent responses from governments and corporations (Hensengerth, 2017). So, it is a mistake to perceive affected community members as vulnerable and/or without power; instead, individuals often find unique and creative ways to secure their agency, even in contexts which are characterized by power imbalances and danger (Rusansky, 2020; Antadze & Gujaraidze, 2021). For this reason, Butler (2016) calls for a move beyond the dichotomy between vulnerability and agency, as this binary assumes that those marked as vulnerable are automatically without power and agency. Such a categorization *'tends to underestimate, or actively efface, modes of political agency and resistance that emerge within so-called vulnerable populations'* (Butler, 2016, p. 15).

3. Theoretical framework

In this theoretical framework, the main concepts of this study will be explained. Firstly, this chapter elaborates on the concept of discourse analysis by explaining how a discourse is defined in this study. Secondly, the analytical heuristic of discursive agency will be explained, which will be used to gain understanding in how various actors actively try to shape and use discourse for their own motives.

3.1. Discourse Analysis, Discourse & Storylines

Discourse analysis can be shortly explained as 'a study of language-in-use' (Johnstone, 2017; Chaiyapa, Esteban & Kameyama, 2018). To understand what a discourse analysis entails in this study, it is important to first elaborate on the concept of 'discourse'.

Discourse is often perceived as an ambivalent concept, that can be used in a variety of ways (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005; Winkel, 2012). This study follows what can be considered a Foucauldian definition of discourse, in which discourse is understood as *'an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices'* (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 175). As concepts and ideas of a particular discourse give meaning 'to social and physical phenomena', they construct a particular reality; i.e. discourses shape the way in which individuals understand and interact with the world around them, and thus phenomena that occur in that world (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005; Feindt & Oels, 2006; Winkel, 2012). As Feindt & Oels (2005) explain: *"For Foucault, a discourse is constitutive of 'reality' in that it physically shapes reality"* (p. 164).

The fact that reality is socially constructed then means that there is not one correct understanding of a particular phenomenon; instead, multiple realities exist that contest one another (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). In relation to hydropower development, the infrastructure of large dams can be understood as a social construct in multiple ways:

> *"A large dam can represent a modern feat of technical engineering that controls nature and brings progress. It can also represent the taming and, even death, of a living, animated river that can no longer flow freely, or be a symbol of greedy capitalism destroying ecology and creating inequality; the drowning of a territory that contains and supports human and natural communities; a source of new flora and fauna triggering tourism, or the key to future urbanization, and many other constructs"* (Boelens, Shah & Bruins, 2019, p. 17).

As Foucault (1977) argues: *"each society has its régime of truth, it's "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true"* (p. 311). The emphasis should hereby be on 'makes function', as a 'true' discourse does not exist; for Foucault, and within discourse analysis, there is not an absolute truth (Foucault, 1977; Whisnant, 2012). Discourse is merely a composition in which *'power and knowledge are joined together'*, i.e. a power-knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1998, p. 100). It entails a system of

knowledge that claims truth, thereby making it a statement of power; by legitimizing particular ways of thinking about the world, it delegitimizes and excludes alternatives (Feindt & Oels, 2006; Winkel, 2012). This means that '*truth is made true'*, whereby a depoliticized norm is created for what valid knowledge entails: *"in this politics-of-truth, modernist water science, water governance and mega-hydraulic policy-making produce permanent, clear results, separating legitimate forms of water knowledge and rights from illegitimate ones"* (Boelens et al., 2019, p. 10). In the end, the acts and aspirations of government are closely connected to the established regime of truth (Huxley, 2007). Based on his case-study on Mekong hydropower governance, Yong (2019) states that the 'regime of truth' around mainstream hydropower development is constituted by technical knowledge, which is established by state actors and mediated through 'experts of truth' to legitimize such a technical narrative. Therefore, *"it is thus a matter of analysing what counts as truth, who has the power to define truth, the role of different authorities of truth, and the epistemological, institutional and technical conditions for the production and circulation of truths"* (Rose, 1999, p. 30).

The idea that an absolute truth does not exist, with various discourses shaping people their perception of reality, explains why interactions surrounding environmental issues such as hydropower development tend to be complex (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). It is not the environmental phenomenon itself that informs policy-making and political debate, but instead, (competing) discourses determine how an issue is discussed and how policy is constructed; the way in which a particular phenomenon is viewed, governs people their behavior towards it (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005; Hensengerth, 2015). Hajer & Versteeg (2005) illustrate this centrality of meaning by using the phenomenon of dying forests as an example. This phenomenon receives international attention due to particular ideas and experiences people attach to it, which leads to various ways of thinking and acting towards it (Hajar & Versteeg, 2005). When considering the existence of multiple truths, conflicts between social groups about mega-hydraulic systems as HPPs can then be understood as clashes between various existing knowledge regimes (Boelens et al., 2019). As Boelens et al. (2019) argue: *"dam development interventions are focal points of intense knowledge battlefields"* (p. 3), whereby there is a continuous struggle in terms of legitimation, validation and exclusion between the dominant 'expert' and other 'lay' forms of knowledge, values and beliefs. In this light, resistance against hydropower development can then be understood as *'an attempt to challenge state-centred regimes of truth'*, criticizing the provided information and producing counternarratives (Yong, 2019, p. 38).

So, a discourse analysis then focusses on studying discourses that exist around a particular phenomenon, i.e. the different ways of defining and engaging with this phenomenon (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). This focus on competing truths makes discourse analysis a suitable tool to study *'struggles over meaning'* (Whisnant, 2012, p. 4). To identify the different components that make up a discourse, this study focusses on its underlying storylines. Storylines can be understood as *'social reality narratives that contain a set of ideas,*

which provide an account of an interpretation of a physical and social phenomenon' (Williams, 2020, p. 12882). Through the production of contrasting storylines, different discourses emerge, thereby resulting in different interpretations of the same phenomenon (Hajer, 1995; Leipold & Winkel, 2017). A set of actors/stakeholders is often united around a particular set of storylines, making the subject of the storyline, in this case hydropower development, appear to be uncontroversial; those adhering to the same storyline, all think about and discuss the phenomenon in a similar manner (Williams, 2020). Williams (2020) describes the 'hydropower myth', explained in chapter 1 as a simplified framing of hydropower development, as one particular storyline in relation to hydropower. Such a group of actors that unite around particular storylines, is called a 'discourse coalition' (Hajer, 1995). Every discourse coalition tries to *'impose their view of reality on others, suggest certain political positions and practices, and criticize alternative social arrangements'* (Hajer, 2006, p. 71). A politically successful coalition is one that has made their own storyline hegemonic in society and has institutionalized its ideas (Leipold & Winkel, 2013). This means that discursive closure has been reached (Hajer, 1995): *"a definition of a problem that erases uncertainty and alternative meanings"* (Silber-Coats, 2017, p. 603).

3.2. Discursive Agency Approach

Discourse analyses in the Foucauldian sense often focus on the importance of (discursive) structures, while actors and the agency they possess are forgotten (Leipold & Winkel, 2013). While Foucault's later work considers the role of subjects and their agency in raising the question *'of how subjects are created in specific socio-historically situated societies'*, scholars have interpreted Foucault's conception of agency in a broad variety of ways, mostly emphasizing the structural determination of agency (Leipold & Winkel, 2017, p. 513). However, *'discursive complexity and ambiguity provide political actors with considerable room to manoeuvre'* (Leipold & Winkel, 2013, p. 2). A continuum of theories and approaches exists in terms of their understanding of the relation between structure and agency, with some approaches conceptualizing agency as being determined by discourse, and others underscoring the possibilities of subjects to act (Leipold & Winkel, 2017). Yet, discourses work both constraining and enabling by shaping actors' perceptions of reality, with actors having freedom in the way they act (Feindt & Oels, 2005). This means that there exists an interrelationship between agency and discourse, whereby actors are, on the one hand, constituted by discursive structures in society, while on the other hand, they constitute such discourses through their acting (Leipold & Winkel, 2017). In fact, individual actors and society at large aim to control and influence discourses (Winkel, 2013). As such, the neglect of agency in discourse analysis can be considered problematic, foregoing on this interrelationship between agency and discourse (Leipold & Winkel, 2017).

To take into account the interrelationship that exists between agency and discourse, this study builds on the Discursive Agency Approach (DAA) as developed by Leipold and Winkel (2016, 2017). The DAA can be understood as *"an analytical heuristic to make the concept of*

discursive agency more accessible for empirical research", aiming to provide a middle ground between structure-focused and agent-focused approaches (Leipold & Winkel, 2017, p. 512). Similar to interpretive policy analysis, it views politics and policy-making as *'a continuous struggle over establishing political truths'* (Leipold & Winkel, 2016, p. 36). Political issues often know many different stakeholders, which makes that political discourses, often consisting of a set of various storylines, present truths that compete with one another (Leipold & Winkel, 2016; Mammadova, Behagel & Masiero, 2020). As the research of Mammadova et al. (2020) and Arifi and Winkel (2021) shows, each discourse hereby creates particular visibilities and invisibilities. This means that in relation to the political issue of hydropower development, each discourse coalition tries to establish their own position as political truth, thereby constantly contesting alternatives. To be able to do so, a subject position is chosen by the involved stakeholders, in which they define themselves and why they need to be included in the discussion of the issue (Leipold & Winkel, 2017). Subject positions are developed through the creation of storylines (Lang, Blum & Leipold, 2019).

The DAA consist of four dimensions that can be analyzed: (1) Discourses (including storylines), (2) Institutions, (3) Agents, and (4) Strategic Practices (Leipold & Winkel, 2017).

The first two elements together form the structural context, whereby the definition of discourse of Hajer and Versteeg (2005) as given above has been adapted to better include the role of agency in discourse. Within the DAA, political discourses are defined *'as sets of object definitions and associated subject positions connected through story lines that ascribe meaning to social and physical phenomena considered subject to governance'* (Leipold & Winkel, 2017, p. 14). Institutions are about formal rules that regulate stakeholders' practices, and the organizations that implement these rules (Leipold & Winkel, 2017). Here, Hajer (1995) speaks of *'discourse institutionalization'* (p. 61), which is about how institutions can be understood as a representation of (once) dominant discourses. The ultimate goal of stakeholders who engage in political debate is often to change (or maintain) such institutions, and therefore, political agency mainly focuses on these institutions (Leipold & Winkel, 2017). In this study related to hydropower development, such an emphasis on changing formal rules can be illustrated by considering the fact that several actors have tried to grant the Vjosa river a high protective status by turning it into a national park, to counter the dominant discourse on hydropower development that depicts it as a sustainable form of development (SavetheBlueHeartofEurope, 2022).

While a focus on the elements of political discourses and institutions helps to gain a better understanding of the structural context, thereby contributing to answering the first sub research question as set out in chapter 1, the last two elements (i.e. agents and strategic practices), are the core focus of the DAA (Leipold & Winkel, 2017) and target sub research questions 2 and 3.

Agents are the actors who have taken up a particular subject position that is coherent with a specific storyline of a discourse. These actors are considered to have discursive agency when they are *'being perceived as a relevant speaker offering a relevant political truth'*

(Leipold & Winkel, 2016, p. 37). Storylines will only become dominant and institutionalized when they are being promoted by agents who are believed to be capable of taking significant action (Leipold & Winkel, 2017). To gain discursive agency, agents are *"constantly making choices about whether, where, when, and how to identify with a particular subject position in specific story lines within this discourse",* which are influenced by their policy preferences (Leipold & Winkel, 2017, p. 524). While agents perform agency by making choices in whether to (not) identify with and support a subject position with their saying and acting, simultaneously, discourses and institutions also influence their choices (not) to do so; in this regard, their possibilities for self-identification are constrained (Leipold & Winkel, 2017). Agents create their own subject positions by *'ascribing particular characteristics to themselves and others'*, which can be divided into two closely related categories: (1) individual skills (e.g. knowledge, rhetoric skills), and (2) positional characteristics (e.g. material resources, professional position) (Leipold & Winkel, 2016, 2017). Leipold and Winkel (2016) their analysis on the U.S. policy against illegal logging illustrates how a coalition between an environmental group and an industry association bring different characteristics to the table (with the environmental group having individual charismatic leadership and the industry association bringing positional power), thereby creating a powerful subject position.

To turn themselves into a relevant speaker, agents use strategic practices, which makes them behave in such a way that it is in line with and supports their own subject position and its corresponding political truth (Leipold & Winkel, 2017; Lang et al., 2019). These practices are *'being dialectically constituted by the (discursive and institutional) opportunity structures on one side and the scope for discursive agency that unfolds in this frame on the other'* (Leipold & Winkel, 2017, p. 525). The aim of such practices is to generate and reach the institutionalization of a political truth (Leipold & Winkel, 2017). Leipold & Winkel (2017) provide a typology of strategic practices, in which they identify four types of strategic practices: (1) Coalition building, (2) Discursive strategies, (3) Governance strategies, and (4) Organizational strategies. Figure 1 elaborates on the types of strategic practices, with a more extensive overview (including examples) being available in the article of Leipold & Winkel (2017). The strategic practices an agent has access to, is dependent on the characteristics this agent has been ascribed. This study focusses on the strategies that agents employ in the discursive struggle surrounding hydropower to reach discursive hegemony in society, to understand the role different agents play in this struggle for hegemony and thereby, discourse institutionalization.

1. *Coalition building* refers to a dynamic process. Coalitions are fluid in membership and do not necessarily coordinate activities beyond sharing a similar storyline (Hajer 1995).
2. *Discursive strategies* encompass all language- and symbol-bound activities that aim to create necessities for (specific) policy intervention. These include, for example:
    a. The production of *storylines*: agents constantly interpret social, physical and discursive events in a manner that is consistent with their policy preferences.
    b. *Rationalisation* and *scientification* versus *emotionalization* and *polarization*: agents may try to rationalize the debate (e.g. by employing the language of science) or polarize debates by mobilizing available emotional patterns in a society.
    c. *Exclusion strategies* encompass the active foreclosing or passive non-reference to a specific agent, problematization or policy solution.
    d. *Delegitimation strategies* target a weakening of the opponents' power by rendering them as illegitimate.
    e. *Employing normative power* means the connection of certain agents and policies with concepts that have a strong positive or negative connotation in the overall political discourse.
    f. *Re- and de-issuing* encompass the strategic re- (and de-)connection of a policy issue to/from a specific policy (solution) (cf. Kingdon 1984).
3. *Governance strategies* target a restructuring of the governance arrangement to the advantage of a specific agent.
4. *Organizational strategies* target the organization of the administration and public management.

Figure 1. Typology of Strategic Practices in DAA (Derived from Leipold and Winkel, 2016, p. 36).

3.3.Discursive Agency Approach in research

Since the Discursive Agency Approach is a new discourse analytical approach, having been only recently proposed by Leipold and Winkel (2016), not many studies have (yet) been conducted that build on this analytical heuristic. Nevertheless, the Discursive Agency Approach has already resulted in new insights for multiple cases of environmental politics. Main topics analyzed so far include illegal logging politics (Leipold & Winkel, 2016; Leipold, Sotirov, Frei & Winkel, 2016), the circular economy transition within the food packaging sector (Simoens & Leipold, 2021; Simoens, Leipold & Fuenfschilling, 2022) and international circular economy narratives in China-EU cooperation (Luo, 2022; Luo, Rodríguez &Leipold, 2023). An overview of these studies' findings is presented below.

Leipold and Winkel (2016) analyze illegal logging politics by studying the 2008 US Lacey Act amendment, while Leipold, Sotirov, Frei and Winkel (2016) take a broader approach, focusing on newly adopted laws in the US, Australia and the European Union that are oriented towards the prohibition of illegally harvested timber from being imported. Both studies argue that divide and conquer strategies have led to a division between legitimate and illegitimate actors, leading to "strategic cross-ideological" coalitions between groups of industry and environmental groups, building on complementary goals: *"Environmentalists aimed to protect "Third World" forests while industry groups aimed to protect "First World" markets against growing competition from these former regions"* (Leipold et al., 2016, p. 294). They conclude that the employment of these dividing strategies has been decisive in establishing these

legitimate groups' discursive agency and their preferred policy solution. Leipold et al. (2016) add to this that the composition of each discourse coalition has varied, with the involvement of significantly different industry partners; due to this difference, the effects on each law's design and implementation turned out differently, in line with each coalition's preferred governance arrangement (Leipold et al., 2016).

Multiple studies using the Discursive Agency Approach have been conducted on the topic of circular economy. In relation to the food packaging sector, Simoens & Leipold's study (2021) on the circular economy transition in the German packaging sector concludes that agents' fear for radical changes can *'not only prevent radical regulatory change but also create incremental change that may intensify unresolved conflicts and, thus, further weaken the actors' capacities for future transition politics'* (p. 822). Simoens, Leipold & Fuenfschilling (2022) describe how the current discursive struggle can result in what they call "discursive lock-ins", reinforcing the status quo rather than changing it. In relation to the single-use food packaging in the German food sector, they describe (1) unchallenged ideas, with all discourses building on similar language and concepts, (2) cooptation, through which the dominant discourse co-opts the solution proposed by the alternative discourse, and (3) incumbents agency, where the continuous reproduction of the dominant discourse legitimizes the status quo, as three discursive lock-ins that lead to such reinforcement (Simoens et al., 2022).

Studying circular economy cooperation between China and the European Union, Luo (2022) proposes 'coalition bridging' and 'inclusion' as two new strategic practices, with bridging focusing on creating communication and negotiation, i.e. a bridge, between different discourse coalitions, and inclusion referring to the inclusion of agents that have so far been excluded from the discursive struggle. Luo, Rodríguez and Leipold (2023) employ the Discursive Agency Approach to analyze how various agents use strategic practices to build different "Waste Ban" narratives. They demonstrate how the "Waste Ban" storylines show different ideas regarding what circular economy cooperation would look like in terms of rules and role division, the implementation scale, and the necessary criteria to assess whether circular economies are sustainable, leading to a political gridlock in the cooperation between China and the European Union.

Another study building on the Discursive Agency Approach includes Lang, Blum and Leipold's study (2019) on the future of the voluntary carbon offset market in light of the Paris Agreement. They demonstrate that agents have reacted in one of two ways to new regulatory environment: (1) discursive continuity, so the rebuilding of storylines to make the voluntary carbon mechanism complement the Paris Agreement, or (2) discursive re-invention, which means the reinventing of the mechanism in such a way that it serves as a tool for sustainable development instead of the reduction of emissions (Lang et al., 2019). Albrecht (2018) describes the updating process of the peatland conservation conservation network in Finland *'as a discursive struggle over the means for conservation' (*p. 1). She illustrates how agreement might exist regarding the need for conservation, but that a discursive struggle might arise regarding what conservation approach (in this case between new and conventional approaches) would be the most suitable (Albrecht, 2018).

4. Methodology

In this chapter, the methodological choices for this research will be described. Firstly, the research design will be explained. Then, it is explained how the data has been collected and analyzed. Lastly, some ethical considerations and the positionality of the researcher will be discussed.

4.1. Research Design

The first two decades of the 21st century have been characterized by a new wave of hydropower development, but hitherto there is no consensus on whether or not hydropower can be categorized as a sustainable energy source. While the literature review presented in chapter 2 shows that hydropower's sustainability and its controversial nature have been widely studied, this research provides, to the researcher's knowledge, the first attempt to study the discursive struggle on hydropower development in the Balkans. For this reason, an exploratory case-study design has been adopted. The overarching case-study in this research is the evaluation of the discursive struggle surrounding hydropower development in the Balkans. It focuses specifically on the countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Slovenia. This focus is the result of two factors: (1) the availability of research participants in these countries, and (2) these countries are considered to be hotspots for new hydropower development (Schwarz, 2015). Taking the Balkans as the site for this case-study, this research provides insights in the role that various agents can play in discursive struggles on hydropower development more broadly. Focusing on one region has allowed for a more detailed description of agents' storylines and the strategies they employ to (aim to) make these narratives hegemonic, thereby creating a more thorough understanding of the roles different agents can take up in discursive struggles on hydropower development.

4.2. Data-collection and analysis

This research is qualitative in nature and takes a mixed-method approach of data-collection. Data has first been collected by conducting a literature study, then by performing a document analysis, and thereafter, by the use of interviews. In the following section, each data-collection method will be further elaborated on.

4.2.1. Literature Study

This research has started with a literature review, whereby a summary has been provided on previous research that has been conducted on hydropower's controversial status and the resistance that this energy source give rise to (see chapter 2 for this overview). For this literature review, the literature platform of Google Scholar has been used. The literature review consists of two main parts: the first part (sections 2.1. and 2.2.) focusses on the complexity of hydropower's sustainability status, elaborating on its perceived benefits and externalities, and the second part (sections 2.3. and 2.4.) includes literature on hydropower

infrastructures' relation to acts of resistance. For the first part, search terms as 'hydropower', 'hydropower construction', 'hydropower infrastructure', 'water infrastructure' and 'hydropower development' have been combined with search terms as 'benefits', 'disadvantages', 'externalities', 'discourse', 'storylines' and 'sustainability'. For the second part, search terms as 'dissatisfaction', 'resistance', 'agency', 'community resistance' have been combined with the search terms used for the previous part: 'hydropower', 'hydropower construction' etc.

4.2.2. Document Analysis

The next data-collection method that has been in this research is that of a document analysis. In this study, document analysis has been used to identify relevant agents and to get an initial overview of existing perspectives on hydropower development in the region, thereby contributing to an initial mapping of the discourse coalitions present in the region. It has also been used later in this study to better understand and enrich the existing storylines as described by the interviewed agents.

A variety of documents has been analyzed, mostly consisting of grey literature and online publications (including, but not limited to, media articles, NGO reports, court rulings and scientific studies) on the development of hydropower in the Western Balkans more broadly, and on individual hydropower projects specifically. Documents have been selected based on two criteria: (1) an online search using various combinations of key words (e.g. 'hydropower development', 'Western Balkans', 'hydropower plants', 'resistance', 'Save the Blue Heart of Europe campaign', '*Project Name* hydropower plant', '*Name river* river', 'resistance', 'Albania', 'Bosnia and Herzegovina', 'Montenegro' etc.), and (2) snowball sampling, so documents that have been later recommended by participants.

For this document analysis, it is important to consider the experienced language barrier. Since the researcher of this study is not familiar with the languages spoken in the Balkans, it has been limited to the analyzation of English documents only. For the most part, this has provided limited problems, since many policy documents, NGO reports, news outlets and other websites have been found to be available in English, due to the international dimension that surrounds the issue of hydropower development in the Balkans. For smaller texts (e.g. social media posts), auto translation has provided a solution. However, most of the conducted Environmental Impact Assessments in the Balkans are written in the national language, meaning that only assessments written in English have been included in this study.

4.2.3. Interviews

Lastly, the data-collection method of interviews has been employed. Interviews have been semi-structured, following a general interview guide (see Appendix 1). The combination of structure and freedom that is characteristic for this type of interviews has made it possible to gain insight in interviewee's opinions, interpretations and perspectives on hydropower development in the Balkans, while it has simultaneously kept space open for interviewee's to

raise additional topic and priorities they considered to be relevant but have not been foreseen in the interview guide.

In total, 12 interviews have been conducted through videocall, using Microsoft Teams or Skype (For a full list of research participants, see Appendix 2). The sample size has been based on the availability of research participants. Interviewee selection has been based on the document analysis, which enabled the identification of agents involved in local and regional discursive struggles around hydropower development in the Balkans, and the method of snowball sampling, whereby identified agents forwarded the contact information of other agents they considered to be relevant. Contact with research participants has been established by email; for NGO's, each organization has appointed a representative for the interview. The only requirement for participating in this study has been that individuals/organizations participate in the discursive struggle surrounding hydropower in the Western Balkans. However, since no translator has been available during this research, participation has also been limited to individuals with a workable knowledge of English language. While this posed to be no problem for most of the contacted individuals, it has made the inclusion of local citizens difficult; it was pointed out by both NGOs and local citizens/activists that many citizens in the areas where hydropower plants are (to be) constructed do not possess this language skill. This has resulted in limited inclusion of local citizens in this study.

Videocalls have been recorded in Microsoft Teams or Skype. Afterwards, the recordings have been transcribed using Microsoft Word and then coded in Microsoft Excel. Coding has taken place in two rounds. The first round has focused on the identification of agents, institutions and the storylines they support. The second round has focused on the identification of discursive strategies these agents employ to (try to) make their discourse hegemonic. For the process of coding, a combination of deductive and inductive coding has been used. The final coding framework is shown in Table 1. The themes are based on the Discursive Agency Approach of Leipold & Winkel (2017), which have been operationalized into concrete codes. Initial codes have been based on a combination of the literature study, the document analysis and the theoretical framework. During the coding process, additional codes have been added based on the transcribed interviews. All interviews have been carried out in English. (Coded) transcripts and consent forms have been doubly stored on a laptop and external hard drive to prevent data loss.

Table 1. Coding Framework

Themes	Codes
Discourses	- Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse - Water Battery discourse - Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse
Institutions	- European Union (legislation) - Public Participation - Environmental Impact Assessment - Sustainability - Subsidies - National legislation - IUCN
Agents	- NGOs - Activists - Artists - Local People - Ministries & Agencies - Companies - National government - Civil society - Lawyers
Strategic Practices	- Coalition building - Storylines - Scientification/Rationalization - Emotionalization/Polarization - Exclusion - Delegitimation - Employing Normative power - Re- and de-issuing - Divide and conquer - Governance strategies - Organizational strategies

4.3. Ethical considerations

Firstly, there is the importance of informed consent. For the participation in interviews, all participants have given verbal consent, thereby agreeing to the use of their stories for this study. Additionally, there is the issue of confidentiality. It has been decided to present participants anonymously throughout the report. Resultingly, the names of both individuals and organizations cannot be found in the report. Instead, each interviewee is referred to as *stakeholders' category*#*number* (e.g. Environmental NGO #1). The point of keeping participants anonymous is that participants cannot be traced back by the readers of the report (outsiders), so that participants can speak freely, without feeling the need to justify their

perspectives and attitudes to those who support a different discourse on hydropower development.

In terms of positionality, it is important to consider the background of the researcher. The background of the researcher would best be described as an urban woman, who comes from a country with low hydropower potential, where rivers are highly developed and a 'natural' river is considered to be non-existent, while herself not suffering from the impacts of an energy development model. On the one hand, this lack of experience means the researcher has no established bias for or against hydropower development and therefore a free mindset towards interviewee's experiences and perspectives. On the other hand, this positionality might have influenced the way in which these experiences have been (mis)interpreted.

5.Discourses on hydropower development in the Balkans

5.1. Discourse 1: Save the Blue Heart of Europe

Environmental NGO's, scientists and environmental activists together form the coalition that supports a discourse around environmental concerns. Their interpretations of realities and events relating to hydropower development come together in the storylines of (a) hydropower as a threat to wilderness, (b) the underestimation of environmental costs, and (c) a corrupt industry that hides its economic interests behind clean energy arguments while prioritizing money-making over respecting nature.

The major storyline of this discourse is that of hydropower as a threat to the unique wilderness of Balkan rivers, which manifests in the destruction of the intactness of these rivers. The argument this coalition uses is that many rivers located in the Balkans so far remain free-flowing and untamed; i.e. Balkan rivers are characterized by their lack of human barriers and unregulated streams.

The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition believes that the continuity of Balkan river systems is a unique phenomenon on the European continent. According this discourse coalition, Balkan rivers can still be described using terms as *'wild'*, *'pure'* and *'special'*, while other rivers in Europe should be characterized by the heavy regulations that have been carried out to control their waters. Regulating nature is deemed to be a long-standing norm in Europe, as environmental NGO #2 describes: *"There is so much beauty in the nature, and we are so used to destroy it, to canalize it, to straighten it, to fasten things. Life is getting faster and faster, and first we straighten the roads, then we straighten the rivers"*. Agents of this discourse coalition argue that the need to regulate nature has only recently entered the Balkan peninsula, with Balkan countries for a long time not touching their nature for economic development in the striking way that the rest of Europe did.

Multiple actors following this discourse explain that the hydropower boom that is currently visible in the Balkan peninsula should be seen as the result of the hydropower industry expanding its markets: *"We want to regulate nature. We don't stop at any point. And that's the problem, that's the problem with our whole system, this capitalistic approach, we never stop until nothing is there again"* (Environmental NGO #2). They reason that opportunities for hydropower development in the rest of Europe have become limited, since much of the hydropower potential has been used already or construction has proven to be difficult due to civil society protections and/or protection laws. The Balkans, on the other hand, have for a long time been considered an unsuitable investment market for hydropower, due to the long period of instability in the countries. As a result, Balkan rivers have remained largely free-flowing and empty, and the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition therefore portrays them as a *'miracle',* surviving *'the decades of destruction'* (Environmental NGO #2).

At the same time, this intactness would then mean that much of the potential for hydropower development has remained unutilized so far. As Environmental NGO #4 explains: *"There are still rivers with potential to be dammed with hydropower plants. Which compared to the rest of the Europe, like Austria or Switzerland, that have been complete, that have used up all of their hydropower potential, there is opportunity in the region".* In the end, this delay in hydropower development in the Balkans is thought to have resulted in a bifurcation between the Balkan peninsula and the rest of Europe; in terms of wilderness, Balkan rivers are now perceived as the direct counterpart of other European rivers.

> *"You have all these different kinds of rivers, while the rest of Europe, it is so monocious, our rivers. Even if there is little space where it is free flowing and it looks great, it's incomparable"* (Environmental NGO #2).

However, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition claims that in the last two decades, the emptiness of Balkan rivers has started to attract the attention of investors, who are trying to expand the hydropower industry's market towards the Balkan peninsula. This would mean that the feature of wilderness, that is deemed to be unique for Balkan rivers, becomes threatened. As civil society NGO #1 explains: *"At the moment, we have more than one million obstacles in European rivers, which means that we literally don't have almost any wild rivers anymore. The last wild rivers are found in the Balkans, and they want to build 3000 new dams there"*.

This dichotomy between rivers in the Balkans and the rest of Europe also manifests itself into different needs. This storyline emphasizes that in the Balkans, the most important aim is to keep the rivers intact, ensuring that its wilderness, and thereby the beauty of 'wild' nature, continues to exist. On the other hand, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition is convinced that other European rivers will have the most benefit by the restoration of their ecosystems, which in the case of rivers often expresses itself through dam removal. Environmental NGO #2 summarizes this perspective as follows: "*What we need in the Balkans, is to protect what is existing. We need something different in the rest of Europe. We need to remove dams and restore rivers in the large scale"*.

(b) The second storyline of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse is that the environmental costs of hydropower development continue to be underestimated, resulting in the degradation of the ecological value that Balkan rivers hold. Where storyline (a) describes the phenomenon of hydropower development from a conservation perspective, focusing on the green uniqueness of Balkan rivers, this storyline targets economic cost-benefit analyses of hydropower, questioning whether these assessments are performed correctly. The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition mentions a long list of potential environmental impacts that should be taken into account when considering the construction of a hydropower plant. The loss of biodiversity is considered to be one of the most important impacts that hydropower may cause; *"fresh water biodiversity in general is the fastest and most affected type of biodiversity you have*" (Environmental NGO #1). Other impacts would include river bed incisions, altering sediment transfers, altering ecosystem functions, irregularities and

reductions of flow, and according to this discourse coalition, those should be seen as an indication for the negative influence of hydropower development on river systems.

This storyline thus aims to point out that hydropower would always have a negative impact on rivers, and that resultingly, these rivers would become less valuable as their natural river systems are interrupted. As scientist #1 argues in relation to the successfully stopped construction of the Kalivaci and Pocem hydropower dams on the Vjosa river (Albania), which remains free of hydropower plants and is in the process of becoming the first national park: *"If they would have succeeded, with the plan originally to build two major dams in the lower part of the river system, the whole thing would have been, the whole value, the whole conservation value of the system would have been destroyed"*.

Considering the broad variety of environmental impacts that would come with the construction of hydropower plants, this discourse coalition believes that hydropower as a green energy source is an illusion. This storyline emphasizes that simply because hydropower supposedly produces zero GHG-emissions, this should not automatically mean that this type of energy can be considered green or environmentally friendly. Within nature conservation nowadays, the main topic of concern is that of climate change, and related to that, the reduction of GHG-emissions. This is illustrated by environmental NGO #2, who says: *"When we say environment, we literally look up into the air and mean CO2 emissions".* They believe that such an emphasis on climate change has diverted the attention away from other environmental crises that are currently happening on the ground. In the end, the hydropower industry, together with other industries, is believed to have been provided with the opportunity to misuse the issue of global warming for their own benefit, ignoring environmental impacts that are unrelated to GHG-emissions; *"They sacrifice the nature, and they pretend it's for the good of the air and CO2. But all you receive is no solution to the global warming issue and destroy nature faster than ever"* (Environmental NGO #2).

The storyline on underestimating environmental costs additionally argues that the impacts hydropower construction potentially has on nature are continuously miscalculated or even ignored. This especially relates to the performance of Environmental Impact Assessments, with the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition questioning the quality of EIA's in terms of completeness and correctness. The argument is that many EIA's have (1) a too narrow scale, (2) are performed in a too short amount of time, and (3) include the wrong indicators, thereby (purposely) obscuring or neglecting to include relevant impacts on nature.

Related to the first argument, multiple actors of this discourse coalition argue that for a decent EIA, multiple years of scientific study are needed, while many EIA's on hydropower projects would not follow such a timeframe. As environmental NGO #3 explains: "*They use these bogus, so-called research of five days per year to get in and then claim there is nothing there. No valuable. Because they go in the wrong time of year, so they cannot see anything anyway".* The second argument includes the reasoning that the EIA's would not take into account the entire scale of the project. The construction of a hydropower plant often comes with the building of infrastructure (e.g. roads, transmission lines, power stations) and the

environmental costs of such projects, necessary for hydropower construction, are believed to often not be included in a hydropower project's EIA. Agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition claim that sometimes, the scale of the EIA's is intentionally lowered. For cascade hydropower projects, whereby multiple hydropower plants are constructed in a row on a river, an EIA would be conducted for each plant separately to diminish environmental impact: *"They [the investors] would actually parse them into separate projects for the assessment part and each assessment was well the impact is not significant. Maybe not if it's only one, but if it's four in a row, then that really is a huge impact"* (Environmental NGO #4). For the third argument, EIA's are believed to not always include the right indicators, therefore not coming to an accurate representation of environmental costs. This would manifest itself in an emphasis on the wrong aspects of the environment in which the hydropower project is taking place. Environmental NGO #4 illustrates this by using the example of air quality. They are convinced that many EIA's for hydropower projects focus on its effects on air quality, while they consider this not to be one of the key impacts hydropower is known for.

Building on what the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition believes to be inaccuracies surrounding environmental costs, this storyline concludes that EIA's conducted for hydropower projects will often come to the wrong conclusion regarding environmental impact: "*Because every EIA in Croatia ends with the statement that the project is fine for nature and the impact would not be that detrimental or problematic, which is simply not true"* (Environmental NGO #3).

In addition to the underestimation of environmental impacts, this storyline argues that hydropower plants are not as lucrative for energy generation as they are portrayed to be. Hydropower construction often comes with huge costs, while the amount of energy that is being produced is not considered to make a significant contribution to the aim of making countries in the Balkans energy secure. This is especially believed to be the case for small hydropower:

> *"The fact is so clear that the small hydropower plants are not delivering anything to the energy part, nothing"* (Environmental NGO #2).
>
> *"When we are talking specifically about energy, the fact is that small hydropower plants do not contribute significant amount of energy"* (Environmental NGO #4).

In the end, this storyline then comes down to the perception that *"the price for having any type of hydropower at any size of river does not off-set the revenue from this hydropower plant. It's a very simple calculation. Very often the amount of energy is overestimated, the environmental damage is underestimated"* (Environmental NGO #1).

(c) The third storyline argues that the hydropower industry is a corrupt industry, which hides its economic interests behind clean energy arguments, while prioritizing the aim of money-making over the value of respecting nature and thereby contributing to the destruction of nature. While hydropower is often presented as being beneficial for the public interest, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition argues that *'there's only one argument why the hydros can be beneficial, and this is for the companies'* (Environmental NGO

#3). While hydropower is often promoted as being a renewable energy source, contributing to the development of the region in which the project is taking place, it also has been fought against for what this discourse coalition perceives to be a *'dirty business'* that only serves the interests of hydropower investors and companies (Environmental NGO #2). This storyline claims that the emphasis on hydropower as a renewable energy source has provided investors with an easy way to make money, with them not caring about how their projects are influencing the ecosystems in which they are taking place. As environmental NGO #2 states: *"It's all about money in the end. All about money. As long as you can earn money by destroying nature, that will happen eventually".*

This storyline expresses the conviction of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition that rivers have increasingly been commodified, with hydropower development being perceived *'as a great opportunity for money-making'* among investors and companies (civil society organization #1). According to this discourse coalition, this means that today, rivers are perceived as a commodity from which money can be generated. As environmental NGO #1 claims: *"These people are just treating it [the river] as a commodity instead of a living ecosystem"*. Multiple agents of this discourse coalition argue that Balkan rivers are nowadays mainly thought of as a strategy for making money, while the role that rivers play in the viability of its surrounding ecosystem is neglected. According to environmental activist #1, this relates to a broader problem that exists in modern society today: *"In today's world, if you talk too much and if you think too much, people would say you are like a philosopher, but in a bad sense, because being a human is not popular anymore. It's all about the money".* He hereby expresses how important money, and making more money, has become in today's society, being placed above all else.

This storyline argues that hydropower has turned into a profitable strategy for money-making, making hydropower development an attractive sector for investors and companies. This profitability is believed to be mainly caused by the subsidy system surrounding hydropower (and other forms of renewable energy). As countries in the Balkans are trying to diversify their energy matrix, they have introduced the opportunity for investors to receive subsidies on energy generated through renewable energy sources. As hydropower officially falls under the category of renewable energy, those investing in hydropower development receive a so-called 'feed-in tariff'. This means that the country's government put in place a standard price that investors would receive for each kWh of electricity generated with hydropower, giving investors a guaranteed price for a certain period of time (±12 or 15 years depending on the country) that is often two or three times higher than the market price. As environmental NGO #4 explains, such feed-in tariffs ensure that hydropower investments quickly turn into profit: *"When you would look into how much money it cost to build a small hydropower plant and then how much money these operators were then guaranteed for 12 or 15 years. They would get their investment back in two to three years. And then after that it was pure profit, because somebody was really paying you".*

Due to the large amount of money involved in hydropower development, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition claims that the surge in hydropower development in

the Balkans has also created an opportunity for corruption, bribery and greenwashing. Multiple agents of this discourse coalition believe that the hydropower industry has the ability to use money to ensure the continuation of hydropower development due to its high profitability. According to this discourse coalition, society is hereby financing both the destruction of nature and corruption within their country, since the subsidizing of hydropower means that private interests are paid for by the public through taxes.

> *"With big money, it's difficult to tell where the money goes, it's a huge problem, it's always a million that can be put aside"* (Environmental NGO #2).

The opportunity for corruption would then be strengthened by the close connections that are believed to exist between hydropower investors, companies and national governments. To illustrate such close ties between government and corporations, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition uses the countries of Montenegro and Slovenia as an example. They argue that the son of Montenegro's president is involved in the hydropower industry, investing in the construction of small hydropower. In the previous government, Slovenia's environmental minister was the head of the company building hydropower plants on the Skava river, while in the current government, the prime minister of Slovenia has a history of being the head of multiple electric distribution companies. Civil society organization #1 calls out the irony of such relations: *"It's like asking a butcher to take care of a flock of sheep. There won't be sheep left in a week or two".*

The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition additionally often creates the narrative of hydropower projects as a never-ending story, since the involvement of both money and corruption would make stopping hydropower projects an extremely difficult practice. In this regard, they compare hydropower development plans to a cat having nine lives: *"Because you oppose it, then it comes back again and then maybe the investor runs out of money, but the idea is still somewhere in a cupboard. And then they pull it out again, and they get the money from somewhere else. It's really hard to get them off the grid for good, these ideas"* (Environmental NGO #1).

5.2. Discourse 2: Water Battery

The water battery discourse is institutionalized in many policies and policy instruments. Examples of such institutionalization can be found in slogans such as *'we can, with hydropower'* (IHA, 2023) and the subsidy systems for energy generated through hydropower. The coalition of its supporters consists of Balkan governments (main ministries involved are the ministries oriented towards energy, economics and environment), investment agencies (e.g. Worldbank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the European Bank), and the hydropower industry in general, most notoriously the investors and hydropower companies. By representing a dominant discourse in debates around hydropower development, it has historically developed to include the storylines of (a) hydropower as a form of green power, (b) hydropower bringing energy security, and (c) hydropower as a contributor to a region's development.

(a) The first storyline of the water battery discourse argues that hydropower should be seen as a green source of energy, falling in the category of renewable energy. Institutions supporting hydropower describe the energy derived from hydropower as *'reliable, pollution-free renewable energy'* (IHA, 2021), and companies promote hydropower as a *'eco-friendly natural energy'* (Toshiba, 2022) that is *'renewable, clean, reliable'* (Statkraft, n.d.). In summary, for actors following the water battery discourse, hydropower is believed to represent *'green or low-impact energy alternatives'* (WorldBank, 2015).

The conviction that hydropower is renewable is based on the reasoning that its energy generation is fueled by moving water. As association #1 explains: *"Hydropower is renewable, as in like water, unless all water evaporates from this planet immediately, which is not likely right now, it is renewable because water is continuing through the kind of water cycle".* Since water is continuously moving through a river, the water battery discourse coalition reckons that hydropower should be seen as a renewable source of energy.

This storyline claims that hydropower can be seen as a climate friendly alternative to fossil fuels, thereby contributing to the mitigation of climate change. The main argument the water battery discourse coalition builds on is that hydropower should be considered the most sustainable energy source in terms of GHG emissions, an important contributor to climate change: *"Hydropower produces no air pollutants and shows the lowest Green House Gases (GHG) emission of all power generation technologies"* (Statkraft, n.d.). Considering these low emissions, hydropower is believed to fall in the category of low-carbon electricity, and the water battery discourse coalition therefore believes that hydropower is meant to be a vital technology in the process of *'decarbonizing the power system'* (IEA, 2022a). The implementation of hydropower would manifest in the reduction of a country's reliance on fossil fuels, thereby making a country's energy system more sustainable. Worldwide, hydropower already generates 70% of all renewable electricity, and the Water Battery discourse coalition therefore deems hydropower as *'the backbone of low-carbon electricity production'* (IEA, 2021).

Following the argument that hydropower would be of great significance in combatting climate change, the Water Battery discourse coalition adds the argument that hydropower could also play an important role in climate change adaptation strategies. As the occurrence of extreme weather events will become more frequent with climate change, this discourse coalition claims that hydropower can contribute significantly to reducing the risks and potential impacts that come with these events. The most notorious weather events will include heavy precipitation, flooding and droughts. In terms of precipitation and flooding, this storyline points out that hydropower projects' reservoirs possess the ability to absorb extreme amounts of water that come with heavy precipitation and/or melting snow. This absorbing capacity is believed to diminish the downstream water flow of the river, and thereby reduces the risk of a flood occurring. At the same time, hydropower would be able to assist in the preparation for periods of drought, by storing water in its reservoirs in advance and thus guaranteeing a minimum flow of the river. As the company Devoll Hydropower Sh.A. (2021), responsible for the construction and operation of the Devoll Hydropower Project in Albania,

summarizes in their performance report: *"In the context of climate change, adapting the water storage capacity of hydropower reservoirs contributes to reducing floods and droughts in regulated river basins"* (p. 26). In the end, the Water Battery discourse coalition believes that hydropower should be seen as a renewable, green source of energy that can play a key role in mitigation and adaptation strategies to climate change.

(b) The second storyline of this discourse perceives hydropower as an important contributor to the aim of making Balkan countries energy secure. All Balkan countries are currently a net importer of energy, with the only exception being Bosnia and Herzegovina (Gallop, Gray, Nikolovska, Mustata & Petcu, 2021). This means that their national energy production is currently not sufficient to meet their country's energy demand, manifesting in a need to import energy from abroad to meet the required energy amount. As such, national governments in the Balkans are currently raising the question on how they can secure their country's energy supply, trying to solve their problems with energy generation.

As they are trying to reduce their dependence on energy imports, Balkan countries have made the development of their energy sector one of their key priorities. At the same time, Balkan countries are putting special emphasis on the incorporation of renewable energy in their energy matrix. Either as a member state or an accession country, Balkan countries need to align their national energy goals with those of the European Union. Within the European Union, much emphasis is put on increasing the share of renewable energy: the updated 2018 Renewable Energy Directive has set out a target to reach a 32% renewable energy share in the European Union by 2030 (European Commission, 2022) and the European Green deal expresses the ambition of the region to become carbon neutral by 2050 (European Commission, 2023) As hydropower has traditionally played an important role in Balkan countries' energy matrices and its potential in the region remains largely unexploited (an estimated 80.000 GWh), emphasis has been placed by Balkan governments on the importance of hydropower development for obtaining these goals (Gallop et al., 2019; IHA, 2019).

This storyline argues that hydropower can play a key role in meeting the growing demand for energy that exists in the Balkan peninsula, since hydropower is believed to possess some unique qualities that other renewable energy sources would be unable to provide. The Water Battery discourse coalition believes that both the stable and flexible nature of hydropower makes it an essential component for Balkan countries to reach energy security. Where solar and wind provide variable electricity to the grid due to their dependence on weather conditions, hydropower is considered to have the ability to provide a baseload similar to what fossil fuels are currently providing through conventional energy generation. Simultaneously, energy derived from solar or wind cannot be stored, while hydropower's reservoirs would create the opportunity for energy reserves. The water storage capacity of reservoirs allows for (quick) changes in electricity demand, as water can be stored and later allowed to flow freely through the turbines at peak load moments. It would also give room for an increased share of solar and wind power, as hydropower provides a way to store this energy for later use: *"So when there's moments that you have excess wind or excess solar, you*

can pump water back up and then use it naturally through gravity when you want to use it" (Association #1).

In summary, this means that whereas other renewable energy sources are considered to be variable and inflexible, hydropower would provide stability and flexibility to the energy system, thereby enhancing the energy security of Balkan countries. The idea that hydropower contributes to the energy security of Balkan countries can be illustrated by looking at the Skavica HPP in Albania, which finalizes the Drin River Cascade and is perceived by the national government and the involved corporations as a *'long-time dream' (*KryeMinisteria, 2022). Albania's power corporation KESH explains that the project will help with increasing energy security and reducing energy imports with ±55% annually, while construction company Bechtel promotes the project as *'a critically important hydropower plant which will play a significant role in Albania reaching its ambition of energy self-sufficiency'* (Bechtel, 2021).

The water battery discourse coalition argues that a sustainable energy matrix would not be possible without hydropower as an energy source. The conviction is that in order to increase the share of renewable energy in a country's energy matrix, hydropower development is a necessity. Due to what the Water Battery discourse coalition believes to be the unique features of hydropower, the exploitation of rivers for energy production is believed to be *'essential in driving the energy transition forward'* (IRENA, n.d.). When considering targets set out in international agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, this discourse coalition aims to demonstrate that reaching these targets will be very difficult without the further construction of hydropower.

> *"It's going to be very difficult to have 100% clean energy without hydropower. … If you look at the biggest countries like Iceland, Norway, Costa Rica, which are closest to meeting like 100% renewable energy, all of them have like 50% plus of hydropower in their grid. So there's that"* (Association #1).

(c) The third storyline of the Water Battery discourse argues that hydropower can boost the development of the region in which the hydropower project is taking place. This discourse coalition believes that a hydropower project can have a positive impact on the broader environment, with hydropower having the ability to transform an area in such a way that it creates new possibilities: *"You can change an area"* (Association #1). Due to the multi-purpose potential that hydropower would possess, made possible by the large amounts of capital that are available for hydropower projects, the hydropower sector believes that it is able to contribute to a region's development on a broader scale. This means that hydropower is perceived by this discourse coalition as beneficial beyond the mere generation of energy, as it offers multi-purpose possibilities: *"Hydropower more and more is becoming multi-purpose. So you have like drought control, irrigation, water supply, flood control, so all the different services that the hydropower scheme can do, that's not just creating electricity"* (Association #1).

The storyline of hydropower boosting regional development reasons that hydropower development will bring benefits to the tourism sector through the creation of artificial lakes. The conviction among agents following the Water Battery discourse is that hydropower

development will accommodate the development of river and lake tourism in the area, as the new hydropower plant and the additional reservoir can be advertised as a touristic place. The Water Battery discourse coalition believes that a hydropower project will be able to enhance the visual beauty of an area by developing a lake catchment, while it will simultaneously produce possibilities for recreational, water-related activities such as boating and fishing. Hydropower could thereby potentially turn such an area into a tourist attraction. As association #1 claims: *"Sometimes hydropower actually amplifies ecotourism. You get a big reservoir and a big forested area and you can do like kayaking and water sports. There's so many opportunities"*. The development of the tourism industry would thereby also prevent population decline in some areas, since the increase in job availability is believed to make regional migration in search of job opportunities increasingly unnecessary.

This storyline also aims to point out that a hydropower project can contribute to the infrastructural development of the area. Since hydropower projects often take place in rural areas, there tends to be a lack of sufficient infrastructure necessary for the completion of a hydropower project. The Water Battery discourse coalition argues that a hydropower project would then not only be responsible for the construction of the hydropower plant, but would also come with the development and/or improvement of other infrastructures, including the construction of roads, transmission and electricity lines. The project manager of the Moglice Hydropower Plant (the largest HPP in the Devoll hydropower project) in Albania states: *"We have also built around 300 km of rural roads linking various villages in the area after being affected by the Devoll hydropower plant project"* (KryeMinisteria, 2020a). The argument of the Water Battery discourse coalition is then that as hydropower projects contribute to infrastructural development, the area in which the project is taking place would become better integrated in the broader region. At the same time, such infrastructural projects would have a positive effect on the employment rate, as new job opportunities will be created during its construction. As Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama explained in relation to the Skavica Hydropower Project:

> *"It is true that hydropower plants have been proven as job creators in Albania, not only just during the construction, but also during their operation phase. Skavica will become a big job creator during its construction and it will generate more jobs in a later phase as a result of this whole complementary development that the area will go through, where, other projects to upgrade infrastructure and aspects of the urban administration of the territory will be developed. It is about hundreds of direct jobs and thousands of other indirect jobs in a whole chain of production, which needs to become operational"* (KryeMinisteria, 2020b).

Related to this storyline's message on transforming the area in which a hydropower project is taking place, is the issue of resettlement. While the creation of a reservoir can bring new economic opportunities to the region in terms of tourism, the building of such large hydropower would also entail the resettlement of local people living in the area that is to be covered with water. The Water Battery discourse coalition claims that in the same way the reservoir can be beneficial for the economic development of the region, resettlement can be

favorable for the local people. The belief of this discourse coalition is that, as hydropower tends to take place in rural areas, many local citizens live in relatively poor circumstances, and resettlement can bring them a better life. Resettlement as a result of hydropower development is believed to grant local communities a way of moving forward and out of their current situation, leading to the perception among agents part of this discourse coalition that *"some people in poverty want to be resettled"* (Association #1). Considering what are believed to be the positive effects of resettlement, association #1 concludes: *"I've been to places where you see hydropower come, do resettlement in a way that's positive and then those people actually like make more money off of it, get resettled with nicer houses, etcetera"*. Resettlement is thus deemed to be a process that moves people to a more comfortable life, granting them better houses with more luxury, while simultaneously creating more employment opportunities in the region through tourism and construction.

5.3. Discourse 3: Socio-Economic Livelihoods

The coalition that supports a discourse around socio-economic livelihoods is formed by civil society and environmental NGO's, activists, local community members and scientists (as will be explained in section 6.1.1., many agents supporting the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse are also involved with the Socio-Economic Livelihoods discourse). While the agents in this coalition do not necessarily share the same environmental concerns, their interpretations of particular occurrences and realities surrounding hydropower come together in the storylines on (a) how hydropower is a threat to local economic development, (b) how Balkan rivers are a lifeline for its local communities, and (c) how hydropower development as a practice is only benefitting those in power.

(a) The first storyline of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse claims that hydropower threatens the economic development of the region in which a hydropower project is taking place. The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition believes that hydropower construction would destroy the river and the natural environment that comes with it, and would thereby reduce the economic opportunities that exist in the area to create added value, i.e. generate income. As hydropower plants are considered to have a large impact on the river and its ecosystem, the belief is that hydropower will also negatively affect the tourism and agricultural sectors, which both depend on these rivers for its existence.

This storyline argues that Balkan rivers can play an important role in the upcoming tourism industry in Balkan countries, especially now that these rivers are increasingly being promoted by the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition as a phenomenon that cannot be found anywhere else on the European continent. A river that is *'alive'* is believed to create significant potential for tourism development (Civil Society NGO #1); biking, hiking, rafting, kayaking and fishing have been mentioned as lucrative options for economic development in the area surrounding the river. The conviction of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition is that hydropower development in Balkan rivers would reduce the attractiveness of the area as a touristic hotspot. It is believed to ruin the visual beauty of the river and to interrupt its natural current. Hydropower would thus negatively influence key

features that are believed to make Balkan riverine environments alluring places for tourists to visit.

Considering how hydropower is promoted in the Water Battery discourse as beneficial to a country's economic development, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition aims to sketch a different reality. Whereas the Water Battery discourse coalition often mentions that the development of hydropower would lead to the growth of the tourism sector in that area, this discourse coalition states that local tourism would benefit more from keeping the river in its natural state. They argue that hydropower plants almost never turn into a tourist attraction. Instead, their conviction is that hydropower plants tend to push the tourism sector out of the region. The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition believes that the reservoirs that come with hydropower development almost never turn out as how they are envisioned and promoted. The Balkan Leeway Collective illustrates this by describing the multiple reservoirs on the lower Sava river in Slovenia: *"It's a disaster. The water was 32 degrees, because it's shallow, and it's just fish were dying, there were rotting fish everywhere and nobody to be seen anywhere. And I am like where is this tourism?"* (Civil Society NGO #1).

This storyline additionally pays attention to the supporting role that the river plays for the local communities that live close to the river and work in agriculture. Rural communities often rely heavily on the river for their livelihood, using its water to irrigate their agricultural fields and to provide water for their livestock. Subsequently, the farm products are then sold and/or exported. Hydropower development is believed to decrease such opportunities for agriculture in the region, as productive land would either get flooded with the creation of a reservoir or would suffer from fluctuations in the available water levels. The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition therefore argues that the development of hydropower plants would diminish the possibility of turning an agricultural business into a sustainable livelihood. This is especially believed to be the case for individuals living downstream from the project.

> *"If you're talking about agricultural communities downstream, they can be affected with less water for watering their crops and or feeding their animals. So this can have a negative impact on their business as well"* (Environmental NGO #4).

As such, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition believes that keeping the river in its original state, so without disruptions of manmade barriers, will produce more economic benefits for the region through its contributions to tourism and agriculture, than using the river as a way to generate electricity. As civil society NGO #1 states: *"The majority of people have way more money through this tourism or agriculture than they would have from these guys building new dams".*

The opportunity to make money through tourism or agriculture is especially important in relation to what is seen as a lack of employment opportunities coming from hydropower development. This storyline argues that hydropower projects bring jobs to local citizens only on a temporary basis: *"Yes, there is employment for a year, maybe two, mostly manual labor. So we're talking about construction, people going out and digging and putting up, building the actual building, but after that, there was really no jobs and no value created"* (Environmental NGO #4). This means that job employment is believed to only happen during the construction

phase of a hydropower projects, i.e. low quality jobs, while after the construction period, often nobody or merely one local citizen would be employed due to the automation of hydropower plants.

In the end, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition believes that local people will be worse off after the construction of a hydropower plant in their area, as its development would destroy their already existing income-generating capacities, while not delivering any new job opportunities to the area. In other words, hydropower development would hamper the economic development in the region rather than enhance it.

(b) The second storyline of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse claims that Balkan rivers are a lifeline to the local communities that live around the river, and a river is therefore believed to form the basis of daily life around it. Multiple actors in the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition argue that the river should be seen as more than just a river; instead, Balkan rivers should be understood as the base of a broader structure that is in place. The existence of Balkan rivers is thus considered to be vital for the life of everyone (human and non-human alike) living in this broader structure: *"Life on Earth exists, because of water"* (local citizen #1). As a citizen originating from Drin River Valley, which is going to be flooded with the construction of Skavica dam, summarizes: *"If you are disrupting the flow of the river, we are disrupting the flow of life"* (Local citizen #1).

This storyline considers the broader, non-materialistic importance that Balkan rivers are deemed to have for local populations, in addition to the role that these rivers would play in the region's opportunity for economic development. Balkan rivers are regarded to have an intrinsic value, thereby contributing to a higher quality of life. This discourse coalition argues that Balkan rivers often make a significant contribution to the activities that people undertake in their leisure time, and they should therefore not be regarded as essential only in terms of generating money. Balkan rivers would grant local people the opportunity to enjoy themselves by spending time in nature, for example by walking next to the river, through fishing and doing other hobbies. This intrinsic value would then ensures that Balkan rivers become more deeply intertwined with the lives of people living along the river: *"We can't see ourselves separate from the rivers, because they're part of our lives and we are part of the rivers' lives"* (Local citizen #1).

Such an entanglement is believed to come with a deep emotional connection to the river, and this storyline aims to explain how this connection will be lost when changes are made to the riverine environment by a hydropower project. The conviction is that, for people who have grown up alongside the river and for who their lives have thus been closely connected to the existence of the river, the deterioration or loss of the river would have a great effect on their daily lives.

> *"Imagine you live next to a forest and you really love that forest. And you grew up with it, and someone comes and says I am going to cut it now. Of course, this would affect you, if you have been raised with it. And that also happens to people that are connected with the river"* (Environmental NGO #1).

This is especially believed to be the case when the construction of a hydropower plant comes with the creation of a reservoir, since this would force people to move away. This would then manifest in the loss of both people's connection to the river and to their land. The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition argues that in such cases, people would not only lose their emotional connection to the river, but also the spiritual connection they hold with the land. This spiritual connection then originates from the burial grounds that can be found alongside Balkan rivers; upon the creation of a reservoir, the graves of people's loved ones will be flooded with water. Following this, local citizen #1 believes that hydropower development will heavily influence local communities' lives: *"I think building the dam in Dibra is disrupting the lives not only of the existing people who live there, but for centuries that have lived there"*.

Following such personal connections, the storyline on Balkan rivers as a lifeline states that people's sense of identity is closely attached to these riverine environments. The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition aims to demonstrate how identity is connected to Balkan rivers, and the environments they produce, at an individual, communal and national level. At the individual level, Balkan rivers are believed to play an important role in local people's identity as farmers and villagers; people's remote and rural existence has been largely made possible by the presence of the river (see storyline 5.3.a.). With the disappearance of the river, this identity would then also disappear, as this type of existence becomes more difficult.

> *"You are going to create a reservoir, you might need to flood a village, you're going to flood pastures, and then agricultural lands, meaning that people who depend on them become city people. If you take land away from villagers, then they are no longer villagers"* (Civil Society NGO #1).

Similar to individual identities, local communities' identity is deemed to be interlinked with the environment in which they are living as a community. As the river is thought to form an important part of Balkan riverine environments, the experience of living as a community in this environment would be heavily influenced by the river and the land around it. Ths would then manifest in communities' sense of community being connected to the Balkan riverine environment in which they exist:

> *"This is going to disrupt everything and almost everything is going to disappear, because we feel and we fear that our identity as Dibra community in the long run will disappear. We're possibly going to be some people moving from place to place, we are not going to be called as Dibrans anymore, because we are not part of that land anymore"* (Local citizen #1).

In terms of identity at a national level, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition also tries to convince civil society more broadly that Balkan rivers form a part of their national heritage; *"It's a significant national heritage, very unique in Europe, from the European comparison"* (Scientist #1). As Balkan rivers are presented as a part of a Balkan country's national heritage, this storyline tries to show that Balkan rivers form a part of all citizens'

personal history, and that therefore, their identities as a national would be tied to the existence of Balkan rivers.

(c) The third storyline argues that hydropower development would only benefit those that are in power, while those that are described by the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition as without power would receive (almost) no benefits. This discourse coalition thereby describes the fight against hydropower as a fight between the powerful and the powerless; in this representation, the powerful often include investors, companies and politicians, while local citizens and communities are often categorized as powerless.

The argument this discourse coalition uses is that the development of hydropower would be beneficial for those that fall in the category of the powerful, since those actors are regarded to be in a position from which they can make money through hydropower projects. This means that the profits made with selling hydropower-generated energy are believed to mainly go to those in positions of power. Therefore, this storyline claims that hydropower would not be worth the investment, following the reasoning that it would only make the rich richer, while local communities would receive nothing in return. The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition believes that with hydropower development in their area, local communities only get to experience what this discourse coalition perceives as the disadvantages of a hydropower project (e.g. restrictions on natural resource use, forced removal, destruction of the area they consider home, and/or decreasing job opportunities and economic development).

> *"And the truth is that they are putting rivers in pipes and earning a lot of money, at the expense of local communities. That was our line of argumentation, with producing such a small amount of energy. So like, they got it all and we lost it all in a way"* (Civil Society NGO #2).

This storyline argues that the ease with which the 'powerful' are able to make money from hydropower investments is caused by the subsidy system that has been put in place by Balkan governments. Balkan governments are therefore believed to facilitate the reduction in economic opportunities that exists for all the local citizens living in this riverine environment, while using money generated through taxation. Multiple agents following the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse claim that this developed subsidy system can only be kept in place with the public money that is spend on these subsidies. This would then mean that taxpayers' money is used to support the subsidy system: *"The development of renewable energy is subsidized through incentives, but the money for the incentives comes from the end users of energy. Because we pay it as consumers in our monthly energy bills"* (Environmental NGO #4).

Following this reasoning, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition believes that local communities, and civil society more broadly, are contributing to hydropower development in Balkan countries through their taxes, as they are the facilitators of the subsidy system that is currently in place. Subsequently, they are also regarded to play a financing role in the loss of livelihoods for people who live near these hydropower projects. As civil society #2 summarizes: *"The whole scheme is structured so it benefits the investor with subsidies and enormous profits with the very little benefit, economic benefit, for the local communities"*. This

means that local communities are deemed to be helping those in power with the generation of benefits, i.e. money, thereby making them even more powerful actors, while they themselves remain in a powerless position.

This argument on the subsidy system is further expanded in this storyline by arguing that the promoted benefit of hydropower generating electricity for the rural areas would not take place in practice. The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition argues that the rural areas are often used as a location to generate energy through hydropower, mostly with small hydropower plants, but that the generated energy is directly fed into the main grid. This would mean that *'this benefit of developing an energy facility that produces low amounts of electricity is lost, because the immediate community is not benefiting from it'* (Environmental NGO #5). At the same time, the local communities are paying the same price for their electricity as those in other parts of the country, while they are the ones experiencing the drawbacks from living close to a hydropower project.

The differentiation between the powerful and the powerless that is characteristic in this storyline additionally relates to the public participation processes. Public consultation is a mandatory step in the execution of a hydropower project, and the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition claims that often not all the legal requirements for a participatory approach on decision-making are being followed. The argument this discourse coalition uses is that local communities are often ignored or excluded from participating in what should be public procedures. Instead, decisions on hydropower development are believed to be made intentionally behind closed doors: *"They [investors] don't feel the need to get the local community on board, because the way to make decision is to work with the ministry to get the permit there and to simply go to the field and start building"* (Environmental NGO #4). Multiple actors in this discourse coalition speak of cases where local communities were not or too late informed about the public consultation meetings. Moreover, meetings would have been held for only the minimum required amount of days, during periods in which they knew not many people would be able to participate (summer break, Christmas), and/or the meeting *'has taken place in a totally different and distant municipality than the one that the project will take place in'* (Environmental NGO #5).

Considering what this discourse coalition perceives to be difficulties regarding consultation and participation, this storyline claims that the lack of communication coming from companies and governments should be seen as a sign of power. As local citizen #1 states: *"It's basically telling the people that I make decisions for you and no matter what you do, I can still have the power to overcome anything that you may go against"*. The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition is convinced that the ignorance of local communities' opinions shows how those with power are in a position to control and make decisions for distant regions. Multiple actors in this discourse coalition argue that only those with money and power are considered to be stakeholders in the public participation processes, while the perspectives of the powerless are not taken into account, since they are not believed to be in a position to act or stop them.

“In this place, when somebody is going to cover your land and your house with water, but they're not being asked, what and how, anything or even given solutions to them or where will they go, what will they do, how they going to recover from everything, the damages or anything. Nothing has been discussed with them. They are left aside as non-existent”.

Table 1. Overview of the three discourses on hydropower development that can be found in the Balkans

Discourse	**Storylines**	**Arguments**
Save the Blue Heart of Europe Discourse	(a) Hydropower as a threat to wilderness	- Balkan rivers remain free-flowing, being characterized by their unregulated streams. - Other European rivers are believed to be heavily regulated to control their waters. - Much undeveloped potential for hydropower, that is now attracting the hydropower sector and thereby threatening the unique intactness of Balkan rivers.
	(b) The underestimation of environmental costs	- Hydropower development has many potential environmental impacts on a river. - Hydropower a green source of energy is an illusion. - Environmental impacts are often miscalculated or ignored, with EIA's being incomplete and/or incorrect. - Hydropower not as lucrative for energy generation as they are often portrayed to be.
	(c) Hydropower as a corrupt industry that prioritizes money-making over respecting nature	- Hydropower development only serves the interests of investors and companies, providing a way for easy money-making. - Rivers are increasingly been commodified. - Subsidies ensure that hydropower investments quickly turn into a profit. - Hydropower creates an opportunity for corruption, bribery and greenwashing, making hydropower projects difficult to put to a stop.
The water battery discourse	(a) Hydropower as a form of green power	- Hydropower's energy generation is fueled by moving water. - Climate friendly alternative to fossil fuels, with zero GHG-emissions (mitigating climate change). - Hydropower can contribute to climate change adaptation strategies, reducing potential consequences of climate change.
	(b) Hydropower bringing energy security	- Hydropower can reduce the reliance on energy imports by generating enough energy to meet growing demand. - Hydropower possesses unique qualities that makes it a renewable energy source with the potential to replace fossil fuels. - A shift to a sustainable energy matrix is not possible without hydropower as an energy source.
	(c) Hydropower as a contributor to a region's development	- Hydropower has the ability to positively transform an area, creating new possibilities. - Hydropower brings benefits to the tourism sector through the creation of artificial lakes. - Hydropower contributes to the infrastructural development of an area. - The resettlement that potentially comes with hydropower can result in better living conditions for local communities.

Socio-economic livelihood discourse	(a) Hydropower as a threat to local economic development	- Hydropower destroys the river and its natural environment, thereby reducing economic opportunities in the area. - Hydropower threatens the regional tourism industry by altering the river's natural state. - Hydropower reduces opportunities for agriculture in the region by flooding productive land or creating fluctuations in available water levels. - Hydropower comes with a lack of alternative employment opportunities.
	(b) Balkans rivers as a lifeline for its local communities	- Balkan rivers are the basis of daily life around it. - Balkan rivers have an intrinsic value, contributing to higher quality of life. - Local people experience deep emotional and spiritual connections with their river and surrounding land. - Balkan rivers form a part of identity at an individual, communal and national level.
	(c) Hydropower as a practice that is only benefitting those in power	- The fight on hydropower is a fight between the powerful and the powerless. - The powerful get the profits from hydropower, while the powerless only experience disadvantages. - The powerless support this system through their tax-paying, facilitating the subsidy system. - The powerless are ignored or excluded from public hearing procedures, and a lack of communication by the powerful; a sign of power.

6. Strategic practices of the three discourse coalitions

6.1. Strategic practices of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition

6.1.1. Coalition building

As explained in section 5.1., The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition consists of scientists, environmental NGOs and environmental activists. This discourse coalition is characterized by a joint following of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse, thereby producing shared storylines related to hydropower as a threat to wilderness, the underestimation of environmental costs and hydropower as a sector that prioritizes money-making over respecting nature. But the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition goes beyond sharing a discourse with similar storylines; agents of this discourse coalition also work together and coordinate activities in order to promote their subject position regarding hydropower development in the Balkan peninsula.

For the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition, coalition building is an important strategic practice, as agents of this discourse coalition argue, *'for that you have to have a lot of people, dedicated people'* to be able to take sufficient action in order to stop hydropower construction (Env. Activist #1). The building of alliances between agents of this discourse coalition enables the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition to set up a more elaborate campaign regarding their subject position oriented towards river protection, in which this discourse coalition has taken joint coordinated actions to raise awareness about the hydropower boom in the Balkans and to stop the construction of such hydropower projects. This means that networking between different agents of this discourse coalition is believed to be essential in this discourse coalition's struggle for discursive agency, as it allows the agents to draw on each other's strengths. Where scientists are able to provide scientific evidence and jargon to the hydropower debate, NGO's and activists function as its communicators, translating science to the wider public.

As agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition explain, cooperation is believed to be vital in promoting their subject position regarding hydropower development. This discourse coalition believes that the first group of agents develops the knowledge regarding hydropower and its impact on riverine ecosystems, while the second group of agents assists in spreading the awareness about this knowledge. As Scientist #1 argues in relation to the stopping of the Kalivac and Pocem hydropower plants on the Vjosa river in Albania, '*it was essentially stopped by cooperation of science and NGO activities'*. He continues: *"I think it's the mixture of good continued science, of research, applied research on the main question with activities to make the issue loud and internationally known".*

But agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition do not merely coordinate activities with each other and are also turning to other discourse coalitions with subject positions supporting their own. Some agents believe that in order to make their subject position regarding hydropower development dominant in society, focusing merely on the Save the Blue Heart discourse with its associated storylines on nature and river protection is not enough to convince civil society. Rather than emphasizing only the consequences of hydropower development on a natural level, some agents of this discourse coalition have decided to also include consequences on a societal scale. This means that the argumentation of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition on hydropower development is expanded to include both arguments related to nature conservation and arguments related to societal development. The reasoning behind such an expansion is that some agents of this discourse coalition believe that the inclusion of societal arguments increases their discursive agency among local communities and civil society more broadly, who then are more willing to accept their narrative regarding hydropower development. For example, Environmental NGO #4 is of the opinion that after the organization has started to implement societal arguments, their subject position became better acknowledged: *"Once we started to do that and really try to look at the impact of hydropower on a society scale, not just on the nature scale, we were heard more actually and we were able to then also have some of the changes that we wanted to have"*. The conviction of such agents is that local communities and civil society can more easily relate to the societal impacts that are associated with hydropower, and also find these impacts of greater importance. Some agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition argue that by only focusing on the natural value of a river, the illusion could be created that these agents care more about nature than about people, harming their discursive agency rather than enhancing it.

> *''We don't really understand this and why is one frog more important than one person. Because we're building, we're bringing life to the region, we are developing, there is jobs, there is economy, there is future. And you want to prevent all of this because, there is this, I don't know, bird living there or I don't know, this tree growing there and so on. So it was really difficult, because we were forced to compare the value of nature to the value of human life. But once we started to also bring in the arguments that the benefits to people are not really that and that there is loss to the people as well, not just benefits, then this moved the argument more towards objectively discussing and really seeing the argument from all of the sides, not just from the one side"* (Environmental NGO #4).

By taking up arguments related to hydropower's impacts on a societal level, the Save the Blue Heart discourse coalition has become part of the socio-economic livelihood discourse coalition as well. This illustrates how agents can support multiple discourses simultaneously, thereby also being part of multiple discourse coalitions at the same time. However, not all agents of this discourse coalition opt for an inclusion of hydropower's social implications, arguing that they are an environmental NGO and are therefore mainly concerned with hydropower's environmental consequences.

6.1.2. Discursive strategies

The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition, consisting of scientists, environmental NGOs and activists, employs normative power to describe what is in their perspective the core issue in the hydropower debate. Agents in this discourse coalition believe that hydropower is a bad source of energy, since it destroys 'pristine' river systems. By ascribing Balkan rivers characteristics as 'pristine', 'wild', 'beautiful' and 'free-flowing', the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition aims to demonstrate the unique ecological value that these rivers hold: *"It turned out they are extremely valuable. It was like crazy how intact the amount of rivers is, and how diverse these river systems still are"* (Environmental NGO #2). This means that this discourse coalition uses concepts as pristineness, wilderness and beauty, which have positive connotations in nature conservation and society more broadly, to highlight the price that hydropower construction will cost in the Western Balkans. The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition hereby creates a strategic division between Balkan rivers and other European rivers. By employing normative power to connect Balkan rivers to concepts of wilderness and beauty, agents of this discourse coalition describe Balkan rivers as rivers with a higher value; they introduce Balkan rivers in terms of their unique pristineness and wilderness, that is unparalleled in other rivers in Europe. By linking such positive connotations to Balkan rivers, and thereby creating a discursive division between Balkan rivers and other European rivers, this discourse coalition tries to justify their opposition against hydropower development while delegitimizing the Water Battery discourse coalition's preference for future hydropower construction in the region.

The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition heavily relies on strategies of rationalization and scientification to attack the hegemonic position of the Water Battery discourse and its supporting institutions. Here, the language of science is used to delegitimize the subject positions related to the discourse oriented towards the exploitation of rivers for energy generation. Strategies of scientification and rationalization play an important role in the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition's fight for discursive hegemony, as the agents following this discourse build on scientific studies to show both the pristine environmental value of Balkan rivers and the threat of hydropower with the environmental impacts its development causes to this wilderness areas.

> *"But what we did at first was assess both sides, so how, like other rivers, how valuable, how intact, and how big is the threat. And that was the main basic analysis we did in the first one, two years. And we're repeating these sessions every second year"* (Environmental NGO #2).

To rationalize the hydropower debate in the region, scientific evidence is gathered to show the importance of Balkan rivers in terms of their high ecological value. Multiple agents in this discourse coalition speak of scientific studies being done to demonstrate the pristineness of Balkan rivers; it is believed that research shows that many rare species, either threatened and/or endemic, can be found in Balkan rivers (e.g. Danube Salmon), with both the river itself and its surrounding environment being the home to many rare types of vegetation. The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition believes that this makes

Balkan rivers a unique biodiversity hotspot in Europe, as many of such species cannot be found anywhere else. Additionally, the Balkans is believed to be largely undiscovered, since Balkan rivers have only recently been turned into a scientific object of study. Therefore, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition believes that Balkan rivers likely house species yet to be discovered, which means that these rivers are believed to be even more exceptional than they are currently presented to be. As activist #1 explains:

> *"Some of them are still not explored very well. That's because all of our history and all these bad times before. But that's a good thing, I believe, because we have a big field that is still not discovered and that is still not... It's threatened but not destroyed. […] That will be our argument, because we have a big field that can be destroyed without even knowing what's there"*

At the same time, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition relies on science to indicate the negative impacts hydropower development will have on Balkan riverine environments. As explained in section 5.1., agents in this discourse coalition point to a broad variety of impacts, including loss of biodiversity, changes in sediment transfer and ecosystem functions, and creating irregularities and reductions of flow. They argue that due to the hydrological changes hydropower projects cause to a river, *'the expert consensus is that this is not the way to do it* [energy generation]*'* and *'that you better involve other methods of energy creation'* (Scientist #1). In addition, this discourse coalition aims to rationalize the hydropower debate by quantifying the dam threat, emphasizing the amount of dams that is currently threatening rivers in the Balkans. By putting the 'hydropower boom' in numbers, actors in this discourse coalition try to visualize the threat.

> *"And the thing is, we were assessing all kinds of data, we looked in all sources, how many dams were actually planned. And that was our biggest strength, I would say. That we didn't limit ourselves to certain rivers or catchments or even countries. We took a whole peninsula approach, that was new. And that created this map with all these red dots. You know, that gives the overview with all the dams. And that map shocked almost everyone, because it made the problem visible. So make the beauty visible, but also the threats. The beauty and the beast"* (Environmental NGO #2).

This means that the conservation discourse coalition thus aims to use science to demonstrate both the beauty of wilderness that they believe still exists in the Balkans, and the threat hydropower creates for this area by impacting the river's ecosystem.

The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition builds on the strategy of re- and de-issuing to strategically connect the issue of hydropower development to other policy issues that currently play an important role in Balkan societies. Hydropower development is reframed by this discourse coalition in such a way that it is connected to new problems, thereby legitimizing their perception of hydropower construction in the Balkans as a bad development. Agents of this discourse coalition actively connect the issue of hydropower development to issues surrounding climate change, energy security, sustainability and corruption, aiming to demonstrate how the problem of hydropower will be exacerbated by such issues in the future. To justify the connections between various of these policy issues,

they mainly rely on the language of science; references to scientific arguments are made by multiple actors of this discourse coalition to illustrate the underlying connections. They argue that the effects of climate change will heavily influence the hydropower sector, and it should therefore not be considered self-evident that hydropower is the solution for reaching energy security in Balkan countries and the accomplishment of the transition towards a full sustainable, renewable energy system. Simultaneously, agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition build on investigative journalism studies to prove the tendency for corruption in the hydropower sector.

> *"I think the question of hydropower going forward will also be very much influenced by the climate change effects. Last summer was the first summer here in the region where we experienced droughts. So there were water shortages in the summer and this is something that was quite shocking for a lot of people, because we're not used to it. And this is a very tangible sort of consequence of climate change and the question of water availability, it will, I think, become a more important question here in the region and it will affect also the hydropower sector, because they need water"* (Environmental NGO #4).

The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition also employs delegitimation strategies to render agents and their storylines wrong and misguided, thereby aiming to weaken their opponent's discursive agency. Agents in this discourse coalition aim to indicate the double agenda of particular agents in the Water Battery discourse coalition, trying to show how hydropower is promoted more out of personal interest than societal concern, and thereby weakening their subject position. They try to undermine the credibility of governmental agents in the Water Battery discourse coalition by pointing out what they believe to be obvious connections to the hydropower sector. As explained in section 5.1., this discourse coalition believes that close connections exist in the Balkans between national governments and hydropower companies and investors. Such a delegitimation strategy has for example been applied to Slovenia's previous environmental minister, who used to be the head of a hydropower company: *"With that guy we were like, you know, now he is in charge of environmental issues and what is he doing, he is continuing his job from there"* (Environmental NGO #1).

Agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition are increasingly combining this with investigative journalism studies, to prove the tendency for corruption in the hydropower sector. By demonstrating the corrupt nature of agents following the Water Battery discourse, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition attempts to display the unreliability of these agents, thereby delegitimizing them and thus reducing their opportunity for achieving discursive agency.

> *"Because the question of the topic of energy, especially renewable energy in our region, is also quite an interesting opportunity for corruption. And there has been quite a lot of cases where corruption happens. So we collaborated with investigative journalist networks for them to look into these stories to uncover certain problems and issues and*

to also then raise awareness of local people and of general public and local communities about what is happening" (Environmental NGO #4).

Building on the strategy of scientification, the use of scientific argumentation is an important delegitimation strategy for this discourse coalition to demonstrate that the storylines claiming that hydropower is beneficial should not be seen as correct: *"And they say good, and we say bad, and then we say no they are not right because of a, b, c, d"* (Environmental NGO #1). Agents in this discourse coalition explain that they use science as a means to indicate the wrong or incomplete information in hydropower projects' environmental impact assessments, either during public hearing procedures or court cases. Environmental NGO #3 argues that they select a broad range of scientific studies for such occurrences: *"We use all information that we can get in order to oppose the EIA or to highlight the part that is really missing or is wrongfully written in".* During bilateral meetings, debates and roundtable discussions, they aim to discredit alternative narratives on hydropower through scientific reasoning, and they thereby try to change someone's opinion on hydropower development.

This means that the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition employs scientific arguments to show the detrimental effects of hydropower construction in a riverine environment while refuting positive storylines on hydropower development, thereby trying to reduce the discursive agency of their opponents. By building on the language of science to delegitimize the storylines of opposing agents, this discourse coalition aims to further rationalize the debate on hydropower. Agents in this discourse coalition believe that they are the ones with the better science, and that they can use such rationalization in their advantage to delegitimize the storylines created by their opponents: *"We have these arguments, scientific arguments against the project. Of course, the government knows that they cannot get into it, because it's even harder to prove that the project will work"* (Environmental NGO #3). The science employed by opposing subject positions is deemed insufficient to refute the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse's argumentation on why hydropower is bad, and they therefore believe they can increase their own discursive agency by employing science as a delegitimation strategy.

"We haven't come across a very good argument for hydropower, in addition to it being because we said so or because it's a traditional source of energy and because it will bring jobs. And all of these are something that is easily disproven with additional analysis and studies" (Environmental NGO #4).

Many aents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe argue that they do not participate in heavy delegitimation strategies: *"We are not so much about shaming"* (Environmental NGO #1). They argue that while the approach of discrediting is part of advocacy and lobby efforts, discrediting then takes the shape of delegitimizing opposing arguments. Heavy delegitimation strategies that include the shaming of particular individuals or institutions is not considered to be productive by agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition, as this does not build a good foundation for future collaborations between opposing agents.

"The approach of discrediting is a part of, as I said, the advocacy and lobbying efforts. We like to do that in bilateral meetings or through roundtable discussions where we can really organize an exchange of opinions. We don't do negative campaigns. We don't do campaigns that are calling out and pointing to somebody being wrong. That's not productive. And that's not a good basis for continuing a relationship, because ultimately the people, the institutions whose opinions we have to change, are also the same institutions that we will then depend on for alternatives, for additional restoration measures and so on. So we need to remain in good relationship, we need to remain partners to each other, but we also need to be able to show them that some of the ways that they're thinking is wrong. And publicly shaming them is not going to get us there" (Environmental NGO #4).

The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition recognizes that convincing people on the negative impacts of hydropower development by merely using scientific environmental results has proven to be difficult. Science has turned out to not always be an appropriate means, since people do not always see the relevance of such scientific studies: *"So when we were coming with these arguments only talking about nature and needing to protect nature, the question was why? Because you know, well, the river is still there. It's still flowing, there's a forest, there is this"* (Environmental NGO #4). This means that getting the science across to civil society in such a way that it convinces them of the dangers of hydropower development is not simply a matter of communicating scientific results: *"This translating scientific findings is a hard and tough cookie. Because you cannot persuade someone into macroinvertebrates and insects, if that person hates bugs. So it doesn't help to say you have so many of them in your river"* (Environmental NGO #1). Agents in the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition argue that the practice of scientification is more straightforward during official procedures, such as legal court cases, than with convincing civil society on a broader scale. Whereas in official procedures, scientific findings can be presented in a straightforward overview, convincing civil society requires a different approach.

Here, agents in the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition turn to strategies of emotionalization and polarization. For some agents of this discourse coalition, this strategy is a relatively new approach; these agents argue that they have long considered themselves to be a science-based organization and have only recently started with exploring the benefits that emotionalization strategies can bring. By building on strategies of emotionalization and polarization, agents of this discourse coalition aim to speak to emotional patterns that exist in society. To do so, the use of science is combined with the organization of activities related to Balkan riverine environments, to invoke new emotional connections to the river or to mobilize emotions people already possess. Multiple agents part of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition have organized educational programs and camps, whereby people get to experience the river a new way by learning about its services: *"Which is a good approach because people are then more open… They are thinking more critically I would say, and more open to your knowledge"* (Environmental NGO #1).

As it is difficult to convince (local) citizens with mere scientific facts about the negative impacts hydropower construction will cause to the river, especially when effects are not directly visible, many agents in the conservation discourse coalition aim to visualize the effects of hydropower construction. They hereby try to create a comparison between the current state of the river, i.e. the river without a hydropower project, and the future state of the river, i.e. the river after a hydropower project is constructed. In projecting their perception of the river's future, agents in the conservation discourse coalition seek to call on people's emotional connection to the river:

> *"We try to project how this part of the river would look like after the hydropower plant is built. Unfortunately we have enough bad examples that we can show on the photo. And basically then, particularly, we try to move the local public against it, because they would be affected the most. And if you manage to convince them that what they are seeing now, it will not be there in the future, then you can get people on your side"* (Environmental NGO #3).

Multiple actors in this discourse coalition also argue that in order to build on people's emotions, they do not necessarily have to rely on available emotions that are directly connected to Balkan rivers. Instead, these agents strategically build on alternative emotional connections existing in the Balkans to increase their discursive agency and thereby make their storylines better accepted. By organizing cultural events with popular artists (e.g. concerts, expositions), these agents build on emotional connections citizens experience with this admired individual rather than with Balkan rivers itself. As Environmental NGO #1 explains: *"And then you have these artists supporting your cause, and if you like that singer for instance, it's easier for you to say hey if he says I don't like this dam being constructed, then I also don't like it, because I am a fan of that person"*. This means that agents in the conservation discourse coalition rely on famous individuals who are well-loved in Balkan societies to legitimize their subject position oriented towards the protection of Balkan rivers against hydropower.

6.1.3. Governance strategies

The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition employs various governance strategies. By trying to restructure policy-making processes and governance arrangements surrounding hydropower development, this discourse coalition promotes particular policy levels/scales and governance arrangements in such a way that it works to their own advantage.

Agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition strategically build on the availability of multiple policy levels that are regulating hydropower development through its legislation to strengthen their discursive agency. Hydropower development in the Balkans is influenced by various forms of legislation, most notoriously at the national level, the level of the European Union and the international level. This creates room to maneuver for agents of this discourse coalition, giving them the possibility to shift between different levels of policy: *"So we try to solve it with the capacities we have and at the level that is appropriate, but if it doesn't work and we feel like it is needed, we move up"* (Environmental NGO #1). This

means that agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition have the option to move to a higher policy level to stop a hydropower project from happening, when the decisions made at the national level are not in line with their own subject position.

> *"There are different administrative levels of courts. So there is a local court, then you have higher administrative court, maybe for the municipality, I am not sure, or the national, then the international and so on. When you have a case, you usually start at the lowest possible level. And then when that doesn't work or one or the other party keeps objecting to the outcome of the court decision, you move to the next higher court. And then you maybe have to find different arguments, or you have to argue based on the same legislation, but a different level also"* (Environmental NGO #1).

Multiple agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition recommend to focus on the multiple available policy levels at the same time. While transferring to a higher court is only possible through appeal, they argue that higher policy levels can also be used as a pressure point. In relation to the European Union, Balkan countries are either a member of the European Union or an accension country and this means that officially, their national legislation should be in line with the legislation of the European Union. However, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition claims that this is not always the case, with European directives not always being implemented accordingly. In this light, agents of this discourse coalition build on European legislation (e.g. EU Environmental Impact Assessment Directive, EU Habitats and Bird Directives in relation to Nature 2000 sites) to point out how, according to them, hydropower projects are violating such enactments. Simultaneously, this discourse coalition uses legislation at the pan-European level (e.g. Bern Convention, Aarhus Convention), to which Balkan countries are signatories even though they are not (yet) a member of the European Union.

Such complaints are not always about preventing a hydropower project from being constructed; instead, they can be employed to delay its construction by creating legal uncertainties for investors, thus creating time for further action: *"The ball is in the investor's field. So he can technically continue with his work, but if he loses on the courts, then he's in trouble. Usually, it's a stall situation. We don't ask for the suspension of the project, but usually investors are not sure how far they can go with it"* (Environmental NGO #4). Complaints also aid in drawing attention to that particular case, which might result in the interest and support from other agents, and/or to put pressure on national governments to move away from a hydropower project. Environmental NGO #1 explains this in relation to the Bern Convention: *"it's not a sharp knife, the Bern Convention, but it's still a pain in the ass"*. As such, agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition focus on a variety of available policy options to influence the decision-making process on a hydropower projects.

An example of how multiple policy levels have been employed to reach the suspension of a hydropower project, is the Pocem hydropower plant in Albania. Here, agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition started with filing a lawsuit at the Albanian administrative court, claiming that the construction of this hydropower plant is not following Albanian law. The Albanian administrative court decided that the construction license was

granted illegitimately by the Ministry of Environment, as the performance of the EIA and public consultation process were not considered to be up to standard by the administrative court. This national strategy has been complemented by actions taken in the international arena, building on European Union and pan-European legislation. Various agents jointly submitted a complaint to the Bern Convention, arguing that the Pocem hydropower plant is not honoring several of its articles. This resulted in twelve recommendations from the standing committee of the Bern Convention to the Albanian government calling for its suspension. Also, a complaint was filed against the Albanian government to the Energy Community regarding violations of the EU Environmental Impact Assessment Directive. By employing a multitude of strategies on multiple policy levels, agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition were able to delay the construction of the Pocem hydropower plant, thereby creating time for further advocacy and lobbying.

The availability of multiple policy levels gives agents part of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition the ability to influence the decision-making process surrounding the acceptance or rejection of hydropower projects. By shifting between relevant policy levels, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition creates the opportunity to show at various scales how hydropower projects are in conflict with existing policies, thereby violating its implementation. It hereby puts pressure on Balkan governments to abandon their subject position favoring hydropower, and thereby constrains the hydropower industry's participation in the discursive struggle on hydropower development, since, according to the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition, the hydropower industry is dependent on the support from the national governments to construct their hydropower projects. In this regard, legislation at both the national and pan-European level can be used by this discourse coalition to render pro-hydropower subject positions redundant in particular cases, as it prevents agents following storylines favoring hydropower from acting on this subject position.

Besides using these different policy levels to stop hydropower plants from being constructed, it also presents the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition with the opportunity to advocate and lobby at multiple levels for legislative changes. Pushing for legislative changes, so influencing particular governance arrangements surrounding hydropower development, affects the participation of agents supporting the Water Battery discourse. Legislative changes that favor subject positions adhering to storylines against hydropower development put constrains on subject positions that are in favor of hydropower; such changes make the development of hydropower more difficult, thereby making this subject position less attractive to follow by putting constrains on it. In doing so, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition aims to sideline the Water Batter discourse coalition, limiting their opportunities from hydropower construction.

At the national level, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition tries to push governments towards certain legislative changes favoring their own subject position. WWF describes a campaign focusing on the governance arrangement that regulates the subsidy system surrounding hydropower. This campaign describes this subsidization as a system that uses tax-payers money to facilitate corruption in the energy sector and has collected

signatures for a petition calling for a change of this system. The result of this campaign has been that four Balkan countries are now changing the feed-in tariff subsidy system (explained in section 5.1.) into a market based premium subsidy system. A subsidy system based on market premiums is believed to be less lucrative, since it is dependent on market forces rather than having a guaranteed price, and this shift is therefore considered to be a successful result of this campaign.

At the same time, agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition try to influence legislation at the level of the European Union. As national legislation of Balkan countries should be in line with legislation of the EU, advocating for legislative change at the level of the EU will also have an effect on the legislation of Balkan countries. Multiple agents of this discourse coalition have for example been involved with affecting the revision of the Renewable Energy Directive, which describes the types of energy that can play a central role in the transition towards a carbon neutral future and thereby the fight against climate change. However, according to this discourse coalition, no considerable attention is paid to how this legal framework for renewable energy development relates to and fits within existing nature legislation: *"You have this whole text about energy and how to save the climate, but you have not one reference to nature legislation, which should not be neglected in that equation. Because these conversations come together. My favorite thing I like to say is that the climate conversation needs nature conservation"* (Environmental NGO #1). Agents of this discourse coalition argue that '*it's a disaster, I would say on the top, that the European Union just has confirmed that hydro can be certified as renewable, and even new hydro'* (Environmental NGO #2), while there is no consideration of how hydropower relates to and fits within existing nature legislation.

Besides trying to push for legislative change at the level of the EU, agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition are also advocating and lobbying for support of their subject position. They are trying to raise awareness among the European Commission about the impacts that hydropower projects (will) have on the ground. They hereby aim to convince the Commission to take action regarding hydropower development in the Balkans. Environmental NGO #4 describes the Energy Community, the international organization involved in the design of an integrated Pan-European energy market, as an important partner in this regard, explaining that one of the concerns of this community is the diversification of renewable energy sources: *"They have proven to be quite a good ally to us, because most of the countries in the region are .. their energy is either fossil fuel or hydropower. And so the energy community has been a very good partner in criticizing countries and calling the countries and pushing the countries into diversifying the renewable energy away from hydropower. So now we see a much stronger penetration of solar and wind in the countries, also following the work that the energy community is doing".* By moving beyond the national level, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition influences the participation of agents in the debate. It allows for the participation of additional agents in the discursive struggle on hydropower development in the Balkans, with new agents expressing support for their subject position and expanding their discourse coalition. At the same time, the support

from powerful international institutions is believed to increase this discourse coalition's legitimacy, thereby positively contributing to their discursive agency.

Based on the governance strategies that have been described so far, an important distinction needs to be made: while on the one hand, agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition use legislation to stop specific hydropower projects from happening, they push, on the other hand, for changes in legislation, to put restrictions on hydropower development in its entirety. This means that legislation is used by this discourse coalition on a case to case basis, but also in taking a more systematic approach to stopping hydropower. However, not all agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition focus on both of these governance strategies; instead, multiple agents express that their main focal point is with only one of these strategies. Environmental NGO #3 describes the organization's emphasis on stopping specific hydropower projects, explaining that the organization focuses on the collection of scientific field data and using the collected data to take legal action against what they consider to be illegitimate decisions regarding the EIA.

> *"Because the practice is that decision would be given in the favor of the project instead of the protection of the nature. We are using court cases to battle those. So we are doing all these legal steps that are possible within the country to stop the project, or at least, to make it difficult to pass through, including also some complaints to the European Commission"* (Environmental NGO #3).

On the other hand, environmental NGO #4 explains that they have been mainly involved with the creation of a system change, pushing for legislative changes to systematically stop small hydropower plants from being constructed. Only occasionally do they approach hydropower development on a case by case basis, when a large hydropower project will be developed.

> *"Because there were quite a lot of the small ones, we were able to work on that more systematically. Because there was an opportunity to address, to try to work on a system change, which was basically to eliminate subsidies for small hydropower plants. For the large ones, […], when they pop up, we tend to deal with them case by case, because it's the only way to deal with them, or we support other organizations who work on that".*

Additionally, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition aims to restructure the decision-making process around hydropower development in such a way that it becomes increasingly science-based. Agents of this discourse coalition hereby target what type of knowledge is seen as legitimate in hydropower decision-making, aiming to govern knowledge systems in such a way that they work in their favor. They claim that politics is a matter of power; *'it's about how to maintain power'* (Scientist #1). In this regard, politicians are believed to not only be concerned with how decisions will affect their country, but also with how these decisions will reflect on themselves. The belief among some agents of this discourse coalition is that how political decisions are received by society influences whether politicians are reselected during election periods. As such, public opinion is considered to be an important factor for political decision-making. As Scientist #1 claims: *"The scientific basis is evident, is very evident. […] But when you bring knowledge directly to politicians, usually it's nothing of interest for them, because they have to look to their society and that they are the ones voting".*

This means that in order to make political decision-making more knowledge-based, it is not considered to be enough to lobby with politicians. Instead, it is a combination of employing scientific arguments to influence political decision-makers directly and to influence public opinion, with science thereby influencing the decision-making process indirectly. Scientist #1 summarizes: *"Science has to develop the general large picture and try to influence the political arena in a way that she has to accept it".* In this regard, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition is aiming to bring science into the political arena, in order to make it influential for decision-making. As such, an essential role is reserved for scientists: *"If you do not have scientists who can translate this [scientific evidence] for the public and politicians, and are ready to do so, then that knowledge is going to be lost".*

Another governance strategy the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition builds on, is the promotion of new governance arrangements for the protection of rivers. As explained in section 5.1., the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition perceives hydropower development as a practice that is difficult to put an end to. Such experienced difficulty makes the protection of Balkan rivers a difficult practice, since hydropower developers can always find a new way to implement the project. This would mean that there is always a risk that hydropower plans from multiple decades ago will return in the future as an opportunity for investment and development. To prevent this reoccurrence of hydropower plans, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition is promoting the legal protection of Balkan rivers either through the establishment of protected areas or expanding its level of protection:

> *"We stopped hundreds and hundreds of dams. Or halted, that's difficult to predict. We stopped a lot of the projects in court or before, in the administrative procedures. But as an investor, you can always come back and say I have a new project, which is very friendly to the environment, it even is better than nature. And then you can start all over again. Which is why we need, from my perspective, much better legal protection of the rivers in principle"* (Environmental NGO #2).
>
> *"They can always in some years say okay we try again, considering how the area might have changed by then. And that's why emphasizing and pushing for the establishment of a protected area was needed, is kind of the ultimate goal for certain rivers that we're addressing with our work"* (Environmental NGO #1).

A famous example of promoting such a governance arrangement is the Vjosa river in Albania, which, after nearly a decade of campaigning, lobbying and taking action, has officially been turned into the Vjosa Wild River National Park (Baker, 2023). The aim of establishing this national park has been to ensure the protection of the Vjosa river, thereby permanently preventing the river and three of its tributaries from hydropower construction.

> *"Like the Vjosa, this wild river national park can be an approach to have high class, huge river networks protected as national park, like prime category river systems that are at least partly funded by international sources. That's the idea with the wild river national park on the Vjosa"* (Environmental NGO #2).

The promotion of such an arrangement thereby influences the opportunities for participation of agents adhering to storylines favoring hydropower development; their subject position has become constrained in the sense that they can follow this position, but they can no longer act on it as it is not in line with the new legal setting. This means that the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition effectively sidelines subject positions that promote hydropower development in the Vjosa river (or other Balkan rivers) through such a governance arrangement. Due to this effect, multiple agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition are now considering the possibilities of such a governance arrangement for other rivers in the Balkans.

6.1.4. Organizational Strategies

The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition also builds on organizational strategies to address political institutions. Through these strategies, this discourse coalition questions the administration and management of policies related to river protection and hydropower. This means that agents of this discourse coalition express criticism on how Balkan states are currently taking care of their rivers and how certain policies surrounding hydropower development are currently executed, calling for better enforcement of river protection policies.

In terms of river protection, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition expresses questions regarding the management of policies focusing on the protection of rivers. Agents of this discourse coalition believe that policies targeting the protection of Balkan river sites are constantly compromised to facilitate further hydropower development. They state that many hydropower projects take place in a broad variety of protected areas (e.g. Natura2000 sites, UNESCO World Heritage Nature sites, nature reserves and national parks), and their conviction is that *'this practice is the rule rather than the exception'* (SavetheBlueHeartofEurope, n.d.). This would mean that the protection of Balkan rivers is regulated on paper, but that the actual protection of these rivers remains weak in practice.

> *"Because usually they give a shit about the protection status, so I think 49 or 50% of these 3500 dams that's on the map are planned or constructed inside protected areas. So what we see, is that protected areas are constantly undermined. They are not valuable. So if you are 50% inside or outside, it does not matter if you are protected or not. So what we also need is to strengthen the protected area status, so they need to be clear if it's protected, it means something for nature"* (Environmental NGO #2).

The hydropower sector would hereby interfere with river protection policies at the level of the European Union. The Save the Blue Heart of Europe emphasizes that the EU Water Framework Directive is focusing on improving the state of European rivers, while the EU Biodiversity Strategy targets the reconnection of European rivers and floodplains by the removal of dams and other obstacles. In the Balkans, the hydropower sector is believed to be acting against such ambitions by continuing to lobby for and further construct hydropower development in the region. Therefore, this discourse coalition claims that Balkan states need to upgrade the protection of their rivers, which goes hand in hand with better enforcement

of these protection policies. This closely relates to this discourse coalition's governance strategy focusing on increasing Balkan rivers' level of protection; the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition critiques the management of current protection policies in place, arguing that hydropower development continuously takes place within protected areas, and therefore, they are aiming to give rivers in the Balkans a higher protection level (e.g. the inclusion of an entire river in the Natura2000 network, turning it into a national park as defined by the IUCN).

Moreover, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition is questioning how Balkan countries are organizing their shift towards energy security and renewable energy, criticizing the focus on hydropower development as their main strategy for reaching this aim. Multiple agents in this discourse coalition argue that they are not necessarily against all hydropower, recognizing the contributions hydropower has made in the last few decades and the potential usefulness that hydropower can still have for particular countries and/or areas:*"I know that dams 50 or 60 years ago were a great way of producing electricity and in Europe, we needed this kind of electricity. But we brought things way to far"* (Civil Society NGO #1). Rather, they are questioning how hydropower development is currently being implemented in the region; agents part of this discourse coalition are convinced that the Balkan region is characterized by an overdevelopment of hydropower plants, while no consistent planning process is present before the start of this construction. The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition claims that there is currently no insight in what would be the most optimal locations for hydropower development in the Balkan countries, as no prior studies have been performed. As Environmental NGO #3 states: *"But the problem is the place where you place these things. […].Because there are never studies with the no go zones. Nobody did pre-feasibility studies, nationwide, where you can do it or where you should not do it. Such things are missing, so we are very poor in space planning actually"*. This would mean that hydropower projects constructed in the Balkans today are not necessarily placed on locations that are the most suitable for energy generation or have the least negative social and ecological impact. Agents of this discourse coalition therefore call for careful consideration on where to next construct hydropower plants.

> *"What we really call for is a smart planning of where the hydropower would be located. So it's not about development and… or it's not about saying no, but it's about saying you know, if we want to build hydropower, we have to really look at the whole river ecosystem, the whole basin and make sure that the location, if we have to go with hydropower, is selected that has the least, the least negative impact. Which is the problem, because it rarely happens so"* (Environmental NGO #4).

This closely relates to the governance strategy of eliminating subsidies for hydropower; the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition questions the implementation of subsidies for hydropower, believing that this subsidization has led to a heedless run on hydropower development, with no consideration of its impacts.

Besides raising questions regarding the broader planning process of hydropower development in Balkan countries, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition also

questions the management of policies surrounding the Environmental Impact Assessment required for individual projects. As has been discussed in section 5.1., agents of this discourse coalition adhere to the storyline that the environmental costs of hydropower projects are continuously underestimated. This includes the argument that many EIA's are insufficient in displaying relevant impacts on the environment, with EIA's often being too narrow in scale, including the wrong indicators and/or being performed in a too short time span. Multiple agents in this discourse coalition argue that the quality of EIA's in the Balkans is not yet a topic of discussion, which would therefore lead to a poor quality of EIA's that then contributes to the conclusion that a hydropower project is not harmful for the environment. In this regard, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition calls for an improvement of the quality of EIA's towards a level that is of scientific standard.

In relation to questioning the quality of EIA's for hydropower projects, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition criticizes how EIA's are currently assessed in the Balkans. As Environmental NGO #3 explains, the Ministry of Environment is supposed to set up a committee, composed of ±10-12 individuals, to draw a conclusion about the EIA. This means that this committee needs to assess the EIA while also considering objections that have been made regarding the EIA by other agents. However, Environmental NGO #3 claims that this committee is part of a malfunctioning system, with the committee serving as *'a scapegoat for ministerial decisions'*. The conviction is that rather than following the scientific basis of the EIA, the committee is in favor of the government and follows the wishes of the government regarding the hydropower project. Such a conception is strengthened by the perception that most individuals on the committee have no relation to environmental science, but are instead involved in sectors such as infrastructure and construction. Therefore, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition questions the current assessment protocol for EIA's on hydropower projects, calling for its reorganization to ensure independent assessment procedures.

> *"What we need, I mean what we really miss, is the independent assessment of these environmental impact assessment. And by independent assessments, I would prefer like a scientific review of scientific papers. That you have anonymous reviewers and then they will write a comment, but they're independent to say everything what they want, you know"* (Environmental NGO #3).

This means that the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition does not claim that there is a problem with the regulation on developing EIA's, but rather that the execution and assessment of EIA's is flawed.

6.2. Strategic Practices of the Water Battery discourse coalition

6.2.1. Coalition Building

Section 5.2. has explained that the Water Battery discourse coalition consists of Balkan governments, investments agencies, and the hydropower industry. Agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition construct similar interpretations of hydropower development in the Balkan peninsula. This means that this discourse coalition is characterized by a shared

discourse, in this study called the Water Battery discourse, and adhere to joint storylines on hydropower as a green form of power, hydropower being able to bring energy security and hydropower being a contributor to a region's socio-economic development. The Water Battery discourse coalition is primarily characterized by this sharing of discourse and corresponding storylines; while agents in this discourse coalition individually try to make their subject position on hydropower development dominant in society, this study has found no signs that agents try to engage in coordinated activities to reach this aim.

6.2.2. Discursive Strategies

The Water Battery discourse coalition employs normative power to display hydropower as a necessary, superior source of renewable energy that comes with limited negative environmental impacts, while it describes the hydropower sector as a moral sector that cares about its impact on the environment and its people. Describing hydropower through the use of concepts as flexibility and stability is a way to highlight the rationality of including hydropower in a country's energy matrix, as such concepts come with positive connotations on hydropower's qualities of operation. It sketches the image of hydropower being able to respond to changes while at the same time being reliable in its energy provision; i.e. such a description of hydropower aims to highlight its trustworthiness, which makes it able to replace traditional energy sources. By promoting the unique qualities of hydropower, the Water battery discourse coalitions sets hydropower apart from other (renewable) energy sources, framing it as a superior, unparalleled source of renewable energy. As the chair of the Hydropower Sustainability Governance Council, part of the IHA, Roger Gill argues: *"Wind and solar have great potential, but they also have limits. It seems to me that hydropower is going to be always a major part of the solution mix"* (Larson, 2021). This means that the Water Battery discourse coalition has ascribed particular positive characteristics to hydropower, which they consider to be unique qualities in the field of renewable energy. In doing so, they have created an important differentiation between hydropower and other sources of renewable energy, that legitimizes the focus of the Water Battery's subject position on hydropower implementation in the Balkan peninsula.

Simultaneously, hydropower is connected to concepts as decarbonization, energy transition and zero GHG-emissions to evoke positive connotations related to sustainability. Such connections aim to give the impression that hydropower is a sustainable energy source, that comes with zero or limited negative environmental impacts. With sustainability playing an important role in today's overall political discourse, this discourse coalition aims to highlight the necessity of hydropower development in the energy sector's pathway to sustainability. In this regard, using concepts related to sustainability is employed as a strategy to point out the inevitability and logic of choosing hydropower development.

The strategy of normative power is also employed to shed the hydropower sector in general in a positive way, thereby setting it apart from other renewable energy sectors, with hydropower being *"the first and only renewable technology to have a global standard for certifying the sustainability of individual projects'* (IHA, 2022). The Water Battery discourse

coalition links the hydropower sector to concepts as sustainable innovation and sustainability standards to emphasize that the hydropower sector is a moral sector that is focused on a process of continuous learning and improvements. Linking concepts related to innovation and transformation to the hydropower sector is meant to call to positive connotations based on ethical grounds, meant to highlight the inclusivity of sustainability concerns in the hydropower sector, and thereby in its projects. By highlighting the inclusive nature of the hydropower sector, the Water Battery discourse coalition aims to legitimize the sector's ambition to further implement hydropower.

> *"I think hydropower is more aware than ever about its shortcomings and it's problems. So I think as the sector, it's much more mature than solar and wind. I think solar and wind in like 10 years' time are going to have a lot more people complaining about land erosion or land use and things like this. And I think the fact that the International Hydropower Association developed a standard that is now becoming independent and is really trying to make hydropower better, shows that it's a sector that cares about making sure that the only projects that move forward are really good projects"* (Association #1).

Similar to the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition, the Water Battery discourse coalition promotes the unique emptiness of Balkan rivers when compared to other European rivers. Agents in this discourse coalition argue that hydropower potential on the European continent has long since been exploited. This means that many suitable locations on European rivers have already been subjected to hydropower development. For these rivers, the only strategy to further maximize energy generation from hydropower is believed to be the improvement of hydropower plants that already exist. However, the Water Battery discourse coalition argues that hydropower potential in the Balkans remains largely unutilized, and the Balkans are therefore deemed a promising region for the exploitation of water resources. It is believed that the entire region of the Balkans has a technical potential of ±80.000 GWh (IHA, 2019), and therefore, the conviction exists among agents of this discourse coalition that much opportunity exists in the region for the construction of new hydropower plants. This means that this discourse coalition hereby characterizes Balkan rivers as empty but full of potential, while other European rivers are described as full and void of new opportunities; i.e. they build on normative power to describe a dichotomy between riverine environments that are suitable for hydropower development, and those that are not. By making such a distinction, this discourse coalition aims to show why hydropower implementation would be a suitable choice for a renewable energy source for the Balkans, further legitimizing their subject position.

The Water Battery discourse coalition employs the strategy of re- and de-issuing to make strategic connections between hydropower development and other important policy issues that receive attention in Balkan politics. Agents in this discourse coalition thereby reframe hydropower development in such a way that it connects to various problems that are currently a focus point within policy debates. Here, hydropower construction is presented as the ultimate solution strategy to issues related to climate change, energy security, economic development, flooding and the need for sustainability. As explained in section 5.2.,

hydropower is presented as a green source of energy that has the potential to aid Balkan countries in reaching energy security and economic development, while simultaneously playing a role in mitigating climate change and adapting to its consequences. This means that the water battery discourse coalition connects hydropower to all kinds of problems. For this discourse coalition, hydropower is a constant solution strategy that can be applied to a broad variety of problematizations that are at play in today's political arena. By tying hydropower to pressing policy issues, agents of the water battery discourse coalition aim to legitimize their own subject position and thereby increase their discursive agency.

The Water Battery discourse also tries to reduce the discursive agency of antagonistic agents, employing delegitimation strategies to render them and their storylines illegitimate and incorrect. Agents in this discourse coalition actively try to undermine the credibility of environmentalists and non-governmental organizations who follow subject positions oriented towards the protection of Balkan rivers against hydropower development. To reach this aim, they try to influence the image the public has of these opposing agents, by presenting them in such a way that it could damage their reputation. Such discrediting occurs indirectly through press releases and the influencing of media and the content of their news articles, and directly during public hearing procedures.

Agents of the Water Battery discourse are believed to try to sketch an image of agents with subject positions oriented towards nature protection as being crazy environmentalists, who are against development of the country: *"They will usually say that during the public hearing process. And if they try to publish something, they will try to discredit these people. Like, you know, useless hippies, greens, lazy bastards, they have nothing to do just to ruin the economic development of the country and stuff like that"* (Environmental NGO #3). Opposing agents are thus described by agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition as laggards, who are not interested in the developmental potential that comes with hydropower construction and are therefore not acting in the best interest of their country. Instead, protestors are described by the Water Battery discourse coalition as delaying the country's development, contributing to existing problems rather than putting a stop to them. Zoran Tegeltija, Bosnia and Herzegovina's chairman of her council of ministers, has publicly spoken about the political actions regarding the Buk Bijela hydropower plant*: "I hope that in political Sarajevo, especially after the problems we are having now with energy products, which started before the strong increase in prices, they will understand that at this moment, due to political attitudes, they are doing much more damage"* (SRNA, 2022). This means that agents of this discourse coalition try to present opposing agents as naïve preventors of progress, thereby trying to reduce their credibility and thus discursive agency.

At the same time, opposing agents argue that they have been accused by agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition of being paid by foreign interests, either by rivaling industries (e.g. a foreign company building wind turbines) or other external forces that want to destroy the country's economic development. The intention is hereby to show that those following subject positions oriented towards the protection of Balkan rivers are involved in the hydropower debate merely for financial profit, using hydropower opposition as a way to

get income rather than caring about the actual content of the debate. They hereby present opposing agents as cold, who only care about their own interests while not considering the interest of the country. While opposing agents argue that such claims are unsubstantiated, they believe such representation to be an important delegitimation strategy of the Water Battery discourse coalition that can lead to their reduced discursive agency.

> *"And if there is someone talking about an issue and there is someone with influence who says well I don't like that this person is arguing against what I am investing in right now, it could be that these people are blamed for being stupid, unrealistic, romantic environmentalists, that are hugging trees and don't understand that we need this hydropower plants or we need this investment in whatever thing. So people, of course, through what they see in the media, are influenced by that"* (Environmental NGO #1).

Some agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition also turn to strategies of exclusion, trying to actively foreclose specific individuals from partaking in the hydropower debate. This means that this discourse coalition actively tries to remove agents from the level playing field, in order to prevent these agents from undermining their discursive agency. Agents of this discourse coalition attempt such exclusion by filing lawsuits, often against prominent environmentalists. Such lawsuits are known as 'SLAPP suits', which is short for a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation. These lawsuits often take the form of a defamation lawsuit, whereby an individual or organization is charged for the spreading of false information and thereby damaging the reputation of the plaintiff. The aim of such SLAPP suits is believed to be intimidation, thereby discouraging activists from speaking out against issues of public importance, while simultaneously burning their resources through legal cases. As such, the goal of the plaintiff is not to win the lawsuit, but to get the critics to retreat and refrain from their activism. Organizations supporting these environmentalists in their work define a SLAPP suit as: *"When you misuse the Court's legal system to stop, to silence the activists*" (Civil Society NGO #2).

Regarding hydropower development in the Balkans, various lawsuits have been filed by hydropower companies which have been labelled as SLAPP suits by international humanitarian organizations. In Kosovo, environmental activists Shpresa Loshaj and Ariatik Gacaferi have been the subject of defamation lawsuits. The Austrian-based hydropower company Kelkos Energy manages four hydropower plants in the Deçan region, and the environmental activists have been publicly speaking out against the company's operations and its impact on the environment. In the lawsuit, Kelkos Energy asks for a monetary compensation in reputational damages from the environmental activists, and a public apology for the stating of false information. Environmental NGO #1 explains the lawsuit against Shpresa Loshaj as follows: *"It tried to shame the activist and to discourage them from going on with that. Because they are on the right path, but they are afraid. They are trying to frighten them"*. Similar cases were filed by the Belgian-owned hydropower company BUK against Sunčica Kovačević and Sara Tuševljak, two local environmental activists. They have been expressing their concerns about the potential environmental impact that will come with the construction of two new small hydropower plants on the Kasindolska river in Bosnia. BUK is

now seeking monetary compensation, while threatening to take further legal action if the two activists continue their fight against the hydropower projects. Environmental NGO #4 speaks of a similar action aimed at the discouragement of an activist from speaking out against hydropower construction in Valbona Valley National Park: *"We had an example in Albania where the lady who was very vocal about stopping construction of a hydropower plant in a National Park, her husband was arrested for some bogus charge and taken to prison for over the weekend. He was let go eventually. I mean, in two or three days, but still this was done".*

Agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition are also believed to actively foreclose other agents in less rigorous ways, mainly by complicating processes of inclusion in such a way that participating becomes more difficult. Section 5.2. set out the various ways in which local communities have experienced problems with accessing public consultation meetings, as agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition are believed to set up meetings in such a way that local citizens are unable to participate. This conviction can be illustrated by a complaint to the Bern Convention by three Montenegrin NGO's, who argue that Elektroprivreda Crne Gore (EPCG), a state-owned electricity utility of Montenegro, has been unwilling to make public consultation more accessible: *"Two public hearings were held in the small towns of Pluzine and Savnik, EPCG refusing to organize a hearing in Podgorica besides Komarnica being a project of national interest. Many interested people could not attend the meetings because of the remote locations"* (NGO Montenegrin Ecologists Society, NGO KOD and NGO Društvo mladih ekologa Nikšić, 2022). A similar argument has been made regarding regulations around protesting, whereby regulation is believed to made so elaborate that it becomes difficult to follow. As Civil Society #1 explains: *"When they [Ministry of Environment] don't like certain topics, they make sure that you really need to follow all of their regulations or whatever with a protest. And it's almost impossible to follow everything. And then they come with police and they give you hard times. If they want to, they can always try and stop you. And they did that, in Slovenia and even in the other countries"*. Other discourse coalitions hereby express a conviction that the Water Battery discourse coalition deliberately tries to exclude civil society from participating in the hydropower debate.

Simultaneously, the other discourse coalitions argue that the Water Battery discourse coalition disregard them and their argumentation; rather than actively trying to exclude agents with opposing subject positions from the debate, agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition aim to ignore the existence of other discourse coalitions as much as possible. As Environmental NGO #3 argues in relation to the reaction of Croatia's national government to their opposition regarding hydropower projects: *"The usual process is ignorance. They try to ignore us as much as they can. And their hopes are based on okay we ignore these guys and then we make our decisions"*. Civil Society NGO #1 expresses a similar sentiment regarding protests against hydropower development in Slovenia, arguing that the government, or specifically the Ministry of Environment, does not always acknowledge the occurrence of such protests, and that specific newspaper outlets also don't pay attention to their actions.

"But sometimes, some media outlets don't report on them [protests], because for instance, there is a pretty big newspaper in Slovenia that is owned by the same guy who is the owner of a construction company that would build dams. And in the first two tours that we organized, they were a media sponsor of the Balkan Rivers Tour. They were all over the newspaper. Then the owner changed and this guy became the owner, and it's zero. Whatever we do, they never report about it" (Civil Society NGO #1).

The Water Battery discourse coalition builds on strategies of scientification and rationalization to discursively delegitimize subject positions that are oriented towards discourses on river protection. To rationalize the debate on hydropower, agents of this discourse coalition employ languages of science, technology and economics. This means that this discourse coalition uses scientific, technical and economic arguments to substantiate their own subject position on hydropower; i.e. they try to justify its implementation by pointing out scientific, technical and economic benefits of this renewable energy source, showing how subject positions oriented towards alternative discourses are misinformed about hydropower's qualities.

To rationalize the hydropower debate in the region, scientific studies are being done to demonstrate the (limited) impacts of a hydropower project on the riverine environment in which the project is taking place, highlighting the measures that will be taken to mitigate these effects. Agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition for example point to studies on downstream fish migration, conducted to innovate measures aimed at improving fish migration (e.g. fish passages), and the monitoring of a river's water temperature to better regulate water releases of reservoirs. But Agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition mainly build on climate science to legitimize hydropower as a renewable energy source. Climate-oriented scientific studies are used by the Water Battery discourse coalition to show the benefits of hydropower in relation to alternative energy sources, mainly focusing hereby on GHG-emissions. Through scientific studies, this discourse coalition aims to prove that hydropower will help in countries' fight against climate change, : *"Independent research suggests that use of hydropower instead of fossil fuels for electricity generation has helped to avoid more than 100 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide in the past 50 years alone. That's roughly equivalent to the annual carbon footprint of the United States for 20 years"* (IHA, n.d.). On top of this, they use science to illustrate how hydropower reservoirs can function as a carbon sink, meaning that they will absorb emissions instead of emitting them. Based on climate science, agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition claim that moving away from hydropower development would not be a smart decision. The Chief Executive Officer of the IHA claims in relation to hydropower construction in the Balkans: "*I know that some environmental NGOs and community activists in the Balkans have called for a complete ban on hydropower development….but that is not what the scientists are saying is needed if we are going to address the climate change challenge and meet energy needs"* (Water Power, 2021).

The language of technology is employed by agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition to demonstrate the technical feasible potential of hydropower that is present in the Balkan peninsula, while simultaneously emphasizing the unique technical features

hydropower possesses. This discourse coalition believes that the Balkans' largely unexploited technical potential of ±80.000 GWh provides many opportunities for energy generation in the region. Many hydropower projects in the Balkan peninsula are justified by the Water Battery discourse coalition on the basis of how much energy they will bring to the electricity grid. For example, the Skavica hydropower plant in Albania is projected to not only contribute up to 1000 GWh/year of electricity production, but also to improve the functioning of the entire Drin River cascade, leading to the production of an additional 80 GWh/year of electricity for the three existing hydropower plants on the Drin river (KESH, n.d.). This would increase the country's electricity production by hydropower plants with 20%, reducing Albania's need for annual electricity imports by 55% (Bechtel, 2021). The Water Battery discourse coalition additionally builds on the language of technology to indicate that hydropower is a mature, advanced technology that works more efficiently than other (renewable) energy sources. As the IHA (2014) explains regarding hydropower: *"Modern hydropower operating efficiencies can reach 95 per cent, and turbine availability for operation can exceed this percentage. This is unmatched by any other source of power generation"*. Concepts as multi-purpose, flexibility, storage capacities and climate mitigation services are used to explain the versatile and reliable nature of hydropower.

By using the language of technology to highlight the unique technical qualities of hydropower, the Water Battery discourse aims to demonstrate how investments in hydropower development are an obvious choice for Balkan countries, and how it is in these countries best interest to maximize its development. In doing so, they try to discursively delegitimize alternative subject positions on hydropower through rational argumentation; arguments of alternative discourse coalitions which state that hydropower is an ineffective energy source that only makes limited contributions to energy generation are described as inappropriate and irrational by the Water Battery discourse coalition.

Besides the employment of scientific and technical languages to support their subject position on hydropower development, the Water Battery discourse coalition also uses these languages to refute (scientific) arguments made by other discourse coalitions. Such a continuous countering of arguments on the basis of science and technology leads to a further rationalizing of the hydropower debate. As Enel Green Power (n.d.), a company responsible for development and management of hydropower plants, explains on their website regarding the controversy on hydropower as a green source of energy due to its reservoirs being a source of methane caused by decomposition of organic residues: *"This debate has been settled by a series of technical and scientific analyses: said emissions were found to be virtually negligible compared to fossil fuels and almost entirely absent in the more modern stations"*.

This discourse coalition also tries to further rationalize the debate by taking an economic approach in analyzing the benefits of hydropower development, whereby agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition rely on the quantification of hydropower's benefits in monetary value. Here, the Water Battery discourse coalition argues that hydropower *'requires relatively high initial investments but has the longest lifetime of any generation plant (with parts replacement), and in general, low operation and maintenance costs'* (IRENA, 2012, p.

27). Resultingly, hydropower is often promoted by the Water Battery discourse coalition as a cheap, affordable source of energy; in 2020, the global weighted-average of hydropower's levelized cost of energy (here measuring the cost of hydropower over its entire lifecycle) was estimated to be 0.44 US$/kWh, which makes it one of today's most cost-effective sources of energy (IRENA, 2021). Simultaneously, agents of the Water Battery discourse argue that the initial investment costs are quickly earned back, thereby making hydropower a wise and profitable investment. As the administrator of KESH, the Albanian Electricity Cooperation, argues in relation to the Skavica Hydropower Plant: *"It turns out that this project repays the value of the investment within the first decade after commissioning. If we take into account the fact that the lifespan of these investments is up to 100 years, then the economic viability of the investment is clear"* (KESH, n.d.). The Water Battery discourse coalition thus employs the language of economics to create a cost-benefit analysis for hydropower development. Such an analysis is used to discursively delegitimize subject positions of other discourse coalitions favoring river protection, by showing that hydropower is the most economically viable energy source and thereby a logical option to include in a country's energy matrix.

6.2.3. Governance Strategies

The Water Battery discourse coalition builds on governance strategies to restructure the policy-making process in such a way that it limits the influence of opposing voices on hydropower decision-making. Agents of this discourse coalition aim to make decisions regarding hydropower projects at the national level, discussing these matters behind closed doors without the involvement of other stakeholders. This means that hydropower decision-making occurs mainly in bilateral form, with negotiations ending in a Memorandum of Cooperation between state actors and hydropower companies. For the construction of the Skavica dam in Albania, the ministry of Infrastructure and Energy has signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the American company Bechtel to jointly construct the hydropower plant: *"The Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy and the company Bechtel will jointly design and approve the Action Plan on the project implementation, in a process that will include the current status of the project technical documentation, the project activity plan, the proposed financing models, the managers of the project activities and deadlines for successful implementation of the Project"* (KryeMinisteria, 2020c). This illustrates how only relevant ministries of the national government and hydropower companies and/or investors will be involved in such decision-making processes, while agents with subject positions oriented towards alternative discourses are excluded from discussing hydropower-related matters.

> *"They [Governments and investors] are not really following all the legal procedures for participatory approach on the decision making, meaning that the local community, even sometimes local governments, are being left outside of the decision making process, which is usually centralized in the capital and it's coming from the central political power like ministries or agencies"* (Environmental NGO #5).

Discourse coalitions oriented towards river protection argue that this leads to non-transparent, undemocratic hydropower governance; criteria used in the decision-making

processes remain unknown to opposing parties, and they argue that there exists no debate on whether the implementation of hydropower projects would be justified. This closely relates to the Water Battery's discursive practice of exclusion, whereby agents of this discourse coalition actively foreclose the participation of opposing agents in public procedures. By restructuring hydropower governance in such a way that it limits participation in decision-making by excluding anti-hydropower agents, the Water Battery discourse coalition tries to bypass and ignore the resistance against hydropower development.

6.2.4. Organizational Strategies

This study has found no clear indications that the Water Battery discourse coalition employs organizational strategies to question the administration and management of hydropower polices in the Balkans.

6.3. Strategic practices of the Socio-Economic Livelihoods discourse coalition

6.3.1. Coalition Building

As explained in section 5.3., the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition is formed by civil society and environmental NGO's, activists, local community members and scientists. This discourse coalition is characterized by a joint following of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse. Agents part of this discourse coalition adhere to shared storylines on hydropower as a threat to local economic development, Balkan rivers as a lifeline for its local communities and hydropower development as a practice benefitting those in power. Besides sharing a discourse with similar storylines, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition is also involved in coordinated activities to promote their subject position on hydropower development in the Balkans.

For the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition, coalition building is an important strategy, enabling them to draw on each other's strengths. The building of alliances between agents of this discourse coalition enables each of them to focus on those type of actions through which they can make the largest impact. This means that through effective networking and communication, agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood are putting emphasis on tasks they consider themselves to be good at. They explain that such coalition-building enables them to use their time more efficiently. When asked about their involvement at the policy-level, Civil Society #1 explains:

> *"In a way that's not really what we are good at. We tried doing that in our first years, but then realized that our strengths is more into making events and getting awareness on a higher level [In society more broadly]. And we are in touch with other NGOs, and we're like look you guys have four people that are in the office every day, you are working in this direction, you stick to that, don't lose time with making, I don't know, making videos or promo or whatever, and we won't lose time by going to a meeting in the parliament or Brussels. So we communicate with each other every now and then, and in the long term, this proved to be way more effective"* (Civil Society #1).

In the end, this results in a strategic distribution of tasks, in which some agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition focus mainly on raising awareness among society, while other agents are mostly involved with lobbying at the policy level and taking legal actions. The building of alliances between different agents following similar subject positions is believed to have increased this discourse coalition's discursive agency among society members: "But the general public really understood the problem and. They saw us as a force being this group of organizations, as a force that was able to stop it. So we really had their support" (Civil Society #2).

Considering the strategy of coalition building, agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihoods discourse coalition argue that it is important to also involve local citizens in their alliances. They argue that collaboration with locals is essential in stopping hydropower projects; the belief is that the legitimacy of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition increases when local citizens and communities adhere to similar storylines and have the same subject position regarding hydropower development, since '*it's their home, and they should have a say in what happens to it*' (Civil Society NGO #1). Multiple agents of this discourse coalition therefore express a strong belief in local power: *"I like both scientists and the locals, but if I would need to pick, I would stand on the side of the locals, because their lives depend on that. It's not just a hobby or whatever"* (Civil Society NGO #1). As such, these agents coordinate activities that focus on raising awareness about hydropower development among local populations and on building their capacity to stand up against hydropower development.

6.3.2. Discursive strategies

The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition employs normative power to invoke both positive and negative associations with agents and their intentions. With regard to their own subject position, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition connects its affiliated agents and their intentions to concepts that have positive connotations in broader society. Local agents and movements that fight against hydropower development in their region are described by the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition as fighting for justice, dignity and freedom.

> *"I very much dream about Bosnia being a just place to live, where dignity of people is respected, where people are asked to give their saying, where people are not tricked and fooled and there were people fight for their local communities with courage. All of that I saw and I have been seeing with this river movement, where people courageously fight against corruption for just, sustainable, clean, healthy life"* (Civil Society NGO #2).

The connecting of agents and their intentions with such concepts aims to highlight the morality of agents contesting hydropower development, while it simultaneously emphasizes the righteousness and inclusivity of such opposition. Through such connections, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition tries to legitimize their own subject position oriented towards river protection, thereby increasing their own discursive agency in society.

In contrast, opponents and their intentions are often connected to concepts which have strong negative connotations in society. Popular concepts that the Socio-Economic

Livelihood discourse coalition connects to their opponents and their hydropower practices, are concepts that can be associated with corruption. This discourse coalition uses concepts as taxpayers' money, hidden costs, lack of transparency and exploitation to highlight the problematic nature of hydropower as a practice; *"Small hydropower plant business is a business owned by rich, usually corrupted people here in Bosnia"* (Civil Society NGO #2). Corruption is a well-known issue within Balkan countries, and by tying such concepts to opposing agents and their intentions, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition aims to highlight the irrationality of favoring a harmful practice that is for a large part supported by and beneficial to dishonest individuals. By making such prejudicial connections, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition can discursively delegitimize subject positions oriented towards hydropower development.

> *"Rivers are being attacked by foreign investment that seek to profit from this 'less developed part of Europe' by exploiting the current political situation and rampant corruption to further their greedy goals"* (Balkan River Defence, n.d.).

Related to hydropower's connection to corruption, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition drafts the hydropower debate as a fight between the powerful and the powerless; those with power are the ones benefitting from future hydropower development, while those without power are only destined to lose from its implementation. The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition hereby ascribes negatives characteristics, associated with being in power, to agents in favor of hydropower development, who are then depicted as agents only interested in using their power to make more money: "*Because if they do end up building these dams on Sava, they will make a ton of money. Because the number goes in… It's almost a billion Euros for all 12 dams. And whoever is going to do it, is going to earn money and gain power in way"* (Civil Society NGO #1). This means that agents with subject positions oriented towards hydropower development are introduced as egotistical individuals with regards only for their own interests, ignoring the needs of local populations: *"That's what really makes me mad, that it's basically exploiting people that don't have a way to say it out loud"* (Civil Society NGO #1). Such a characterization of those in power as the only ones benefiting from hydropower is aimed at the legitimization of their own subject position oriented towards river protection, since this discourse coalition is convinced that river protection, so keeping the rivers intact, will provide better opportunities for improved living circumstances than hydropower development.

The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition further builds on normative power to associate the practice of hydropower development with the opposite of progress; they aim to point out that while Balkan countries are concentrating on the construction of new hydropower plants, many other European countries, that are often considered to be more advanced in terms of development, are redirecting their efforts towards dam removal. They hereby create a distinction between Balkan countries and other European countries, stressing the progressiveness of the rest of Europe in their journey towards river restoration while the Balkans remain fixated on the potential of hydropower. Agents of this discourse coalition thus use other European countries as an example to legitimize their own subject position.

"It's another thing that should be an eye-opener. Whenever I am talking here, I am like you always want to follow developed nations, Germany or Switzerland or whoever. And they are removing their dams, because they figured out they are not the best solution. And now we are going to what, build them? Spend all this money, then in thirty years, we are going to figure out we made a mistake and then we are going to spend a ton of money again to try and remove them. And we are going to lose seventy years for what?" (Environmental NGO #1).

The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition also practices the strategy of re- and de-issuing, connecting hydropower development to multiple issues currently receiving attention in Balkan politics. Prominent issues that are reframed by this discourse coalition in such a way that they connect to hydropower development include energy security, regional development, sustainability and ground water issues. Agents of this discourse coalition hereby reframe hydropower in such a way that it drops the perception of hydropower as a solution strategy to these policy issues, arguing that hydropower development would exacerbate these already existing policy problems rather than solve them. They argue that hydropower only plays a marginal role in terms of electricity generation, therefore not being able to solve Balkan countries' problems with energy provision, while it takes away economic opportunities that a river brings to the populations around it, and should therefore not be considered a sustainable energy source. At the same time, the Socio-Economic livelihood discourse coalition aims to connect hydropower to other subjects that are considered to be important by a broad variety of people, linking hydropower to policy subjects it might have an effect on. This can be illustrated by using the example of Civil Society NGO #1, who is convinced that hydropower will eventually have an effect on the availability of drinking water: *"In the long term, it's going to affect the drinking water, because the groundwater won't get as much water from the river, which affects everybody. And I have seen many cases like that. And when it comes to drinking water, then everybody becomes interested. People are like okay so you are saying this will affect the quality and the quantity of the drinking water we depend on, well then we don't think it's smart to build this, because we are only going to get eight or two megawatts"*. This means that the re- and de-issuing strategy is used to create new problems, which are closely tied to the implementation of hydropower. By reframing hydropower in such a way that it connects to such pressing issues, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition simultaneously aims to increase their own discursive agency in society and to delegitimize subject positions oriented towards hydropower development. They thus build on re- and de-issuing strategies to illustrate why hydropower should not be perceived as a solution strategy for these issues, thereby paving the way for new solution strategies that focus on other forms of renewable energy (mainly solar and wind) and keep Balkan rivers in its intact state.

Agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition argue that convincing society through the use of scientific arguments is difficult, since citizens are characterized by different worries and interests than scientists. They argue that many scientific arguments focus on aspects of the environment that people have no connection to, and resultingly, have

limited or no interest in. Some agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood therefore argue that scientists and scientific organizations have difficulties in connecting with citizens, since they are concerned about abstract aspects of hydropower development that do not speak to the people.

> *"Scientists are sometimes narrow minded. They see these subspecies of a fish, that's 3 centimeters long. And they say that in this part of the river, you can find subspecies of this species, and we are not really sure if it is a subspecies, but it has a different colour of the pectoral fin. And then they talk to other people about this, and people are like are you fucking kidding me, I don't care about this little fish, what do I have to do with this fish, I have never seen it, I will never see it, I don't give a shit if there is this fish in the river or not. And then they are all surprised well people don't care. Yeah sure they don't care, because they are not in contact with this fish. As a scientist, this is your main thing, but in reality, this is such a minor thing that you almost zero chances if you're going to address people with this"* (Civil Society NGO #1).

In this regard, the language of science is not considered to be the most effective one in raising awareness regarding hydropower development among civil society. As the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition puts a lot of emphasis on the importance of local power, this discourse coalition believes that it is important to find alternative ways to get local populations and civil society more broadly engaged in the fight against hydropower. In terms of rationalization, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition therefore turns to the language of economics.

Agents of this discourse coalition mainly employ the language of economics to attack the hegemonic discourse oriented towards hydropower development and support their own subject position oriented towards river protection. Here, the language of economics can mainly be found in the use of measurements to express what they consider to be the true revenues of hydropower implementation. Similar language is employed to demonstrate what the value of the river could be without hydropower construction. This means that the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition builds on various cost-benefit analyses to illustrate the false promises that come from the Water Battery discourse coalition promising economic development, thereby discursively delegitimize subject positions oriented towards hydropower construction.

> *"Sometimes it's the best if you put things in numbers. There's been a stat here on the Soca river here in Slovenia, that's famous for rafting and kayaking, and it's like one of our top tourist assets. And they compare it… There is two parts of the river in Slovenia. One part has no dams and it's like really developed in terms of tourism, and the other part has three dams. They analyzed the income that the river generates, and it's insane. When there's dam, and again I am making up these numbers, I have no idea what the exact numbers are, but the part with dams produces 100 million a year, but it gets distributed amongst people in one company that's mostly owned by the government. Then the other part of the river produces 200 million and it gets distributed amongst 5000 families that have campsites, rafting businesses or whatever. So basically, the*

river is the drive for your economy. And if you're able to prove that, and you prove that the free-flowing river produces more income in a way than it would if it's dammed, then the story is more or less over" (Civil Society NGO #1).

Moreover, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition also mobilizes emotional patterns that are available in Balkan societies, building on strategies of emotionalization and polarization to polarize the debate in their favor. As this discourse coalition strongly believes in local communities and their power, an important emotional pattern the Socio-Economic Livelihood mobilizes is that of individuals' emotional connection to the river. Agents of this discourse coalition aim to foster such a connection to increase their discursive agency among the local population. To do so, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition personifies Balkan rivers, presenting them as a unique member of the community: *"The Sava River is kind of like the girl next door. You spend your childhood playing together, never really realizing how attractive/mysterious/beautiful and incredible she really is"* (Balkan River Defence, 2021). Agents of this discourse coalition build their emotional strategies on the conviction that individuals only start to appreciate the magnificence of Balkan rivers once they are gone. They therefore focus on the organization of activities, in which the river plays a central role, to nourish the appreciation individuals already feel for the river and/or to ignite new feelings regarding riverine environments (e.g. hiking and kayaking trips). The belief is that such experiences will strengthen the emotional connection people have with Balkan rivers, making citizens interested in their fight against hydropower and thereby increasing this discourse coalition's discursive agency in the process: *"I do think that if they see the river and experience the river, they will be against the dam. But maybe I am wrong. But as long as they don't see it, they don't really… They aren't even interested in being a decision-maker"* (Civil Society NGO #1).

In relation to the personification of Balkan rivers, multiple agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition speaks of these rivers as agents themselves, depicting them as important stakeholders in the hydropower debate, who have themselves emotions regarding hydropower construction.

> *"I believe that rivers have emotions. I have said that the rivers are with emotions […]. We as humans have made decisions what to do with the river. We are basically either helping the river flow or basically interrupting the river flow. So we kind of have, and of course the river will be very angry with us, when we are interrupting their flow, when we are interrupting their natural life, they are going to be very angry with us"* (Local citizen #1).

Agents in the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition aim to express these emotions by giving a voice to the river. This means that they let the river herself explain her contributions to the environment and how this will be impacted by hydropower construction, rather than the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition giving such a declaration themselves. Such a strategy has for example been employed in the documentary 'One for the river: the Sava story', beginning with the river introducing herself: *"I am Sava. Tributaries pour into me from all sides, some smaller, others larger. If I were the trunk of a tree, then they are my branches.*

United, we form a being that functions as a whole" (Bregar, 2022). During the documentary, Sava then continues to explain how human greed has resulted in her impairment and exploitation, and what consequences this has for the environment surrounding her: *"Here, I am not a river. Here is where you crippled me. Here. I am just water in a reservoir waiting to spin turbines when you desire"* (Bregar, 2022). By giving a voice to Balkan rivers, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition humanizes these rivers, with the aim to give them a higher standing in Balkan societies. This discourse coalition hereby tries to increase their discursive agency among citizens living close to the river, by building on the emotional connection these people have with the river.

To cast agents and their storylines an practices in a detrimental light, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition also utilizes delegitimation strategies. For this discourse coalition, digital media play an important role in this regard, enabling them to visualize what is in their perspective wrong about opponents' storylines and practices. Agents in this discourse coalition use pictures, videos and documentaries to illustrate what they consider to be harmful practices of the hydropower industry, thereby trying to delegitimize their opponents' storylines regarding hydropower as a green source of energy and as benefitting regional development. As Civil Society #1 explains, they try to make a comparison of what the Water Battery discourse coalition promises in relation to hydropower and what the actual outcome is after hydropower construction:

> *"And we are just making a video where they will completely lose it, they will probably try and sue us, but that's okay. That's just more publicity for what they are doing. Because we basically took their statements about the dams they built on the lower Skava, and we went to the location in the summer, when it was 35 degrees. And the water had 36 degrees, and there were no tourists. And we are just showing their statements, there is going to be a ton of tourists, and we're like are we blind or is something wrong, we don't see any tourists. This is great for fish, and we show footage of fish that are rotting on the surface because the water is too warm for them. And like dams make the landscape look even nicer, and we show a shot that's disgusting, they raised the level of the river above the level of the houses, what if the dam breaks or something. You are going to kill people"*.

The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition thus uses their opponents' own storylines and practices against them; by rendering their storylines and practices as untruthful and harmful, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition aims to delegitimize their opponents' subject position and thereby weaken their discursive agency.

It is important to note that not all agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition perceive this themselves as delegitimation strategies per se. As Civil Society #2 declares: *"Well, I wouldn't say that we are trying to discredit anyone. We're just trying to say what the truth is"*. This shows that some agents in this discourse coalition believe that they are spreading their perspective regarding hydropower development to increase their own discursive agency, while they do not actively acknowledge how the distribution of their truth can also serve as a delegitimation strategy to weaken their opponents' subject position at the

same time. Other agents, on the other hand, declare to employ this strategy more deliberately, showing awareness of how their actions can influence the discursive agency of their opponent: *"If they play a nasty game, I am more than happy to play a nasty game"* (Civil Society NGO #1).

The strategy of exclusion is employed by the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition to a limited extent. The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse believes that solar and wind are more sustainable renewable energy options than hydropower, and would therefore be a more sensical option to solve the energy insecurity of Balkan countries. However, when shifting the focus to alternative renewable energy sources as a solution to Balkan countries' energy issues, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition keeps the focus on hydropower's shortcomings. While they promote the alternative renewable energy generated by solar and wind as a substitute for what they consider to be unsustainable hydropower, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition excludes questions of sustainability in relation to these other renewable energy sources. Agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition point out that agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition easily look over the complexity of sustainability, and are thereby easily pointing to solar and wind as alternatives for hydropower while ignoring the potential sustainability issues with these energy sources. The aim of this strategy is to privilege the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition's own discursive agency, while further delegitimizing those subject positions oriented towards hydropower development.

6.3.3. Governance strategies

The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition builds on governance strategies to restructure the policy-making process in such a way that it pays more attention to society's perspectives on hydropower. Agents of this discourse coalition emphasize the essential role that raising awareness in Balkan societies can play for reaching an institutional shift regarding hydropower development: "*I think unless people know about this, and I mean people in general, like mainstream people, not just biologists and ecologists, the chances of stopping this are almost zero"* (Civil Society NGO #1). As such, they have been involved in drawing attention to the issue of hydropower development at multiple societal levels, building mainly on campaigning, advocacy and movement building to *'try to inspire and motivate the general public'* (Civil Society NGO #2). To bring awareness in society, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition is concerned with organizing actions at local, national, regional and international scales.

At the local level, agents of the Socio-Economic discourse coalition are involved in local actions against hydropower projects. Such actions can be divided in two categories: (1) actions aiming to raise the awareness among local citizens about the externalities of a particular hydropower project, and (2) actions directly protesting against hydropower projects. An example of local protesting against hydropower development is the 'Brave Women of Kruščica', a group of local women who blocked a bridge for 534 days to prevent a hydropower

company's construction machinery from reaching the construction site, thereby protecting the river Kruščica in Bosnia and Herzegovina from small hydropower development.

Agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition undertake similar types of actions at the national level, setting up protests and campaigns to raise awareness in society about the national government's hydropower policies and to put pressure on the government to change their subject position. Civil society NGO #2 describes what they call a public figure campaign, urging citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina to write to decision-makers regarding the adaptation of a new law on small hydropower construction.

> *"We were putting faces of the politicians on posters and posting them on social media and then putting their emails, inviting people to send them letters. Then, we did letter campaign, where we asked everyone to send a letter directly to the members of the Parliament. That was like a very nice initiative"* (Civil society #2).

An example of movement building at the regional level of the Balkans is the Balkan Rivers Tour. The Balkan Rivers Tour is a yearly event in which kayakers paddle one or multiple rivers in the Balkans that are threatened by hydropower development. On the way, the kayakers collaborate with local activists in actions against a hydropower plant's construction, while also showing what beauty would be lost to hydropower construction to draw awareness to the issue of water infrastructures in the Balkans. The tour is meant *'to do something simple and effective in a more down to earth way and give people the option to join in and get involved directly'* (Balkan River Defence, n.d.), thereby reducing the barrier for creating interest and participation in river conservation. It is currently considered to be the biggest organized river conservation action on the European continent; i.e. a movement that focuses on the protection of wild rivers (Balkan River Defence, n.d.).

Agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition have also been involved in setting up various international campaigns. They are convinced that raising awareness about what are believed to be hydropower's externalities should happen at a wider scale, focusing not merely on the region that is subjected to the actual 'hydropower tsunami' but also to countries outside of this region:

> *"Because Bosnia is an international baby, and whenever there is an international light over the country, our politicians, they suffer from that. It moves more than their people telling them to do something. That's my opinion"* (Civil Society NGO #2).

A recent notorious international campaign was set up in the summer of 2021, when 'Vjosa National Park Now' letters were put in front of multiple famous buildings in cities and parks around the world (e.g. Eiffel Tower, Grand Canyon, Brandenburg Gate). The campaign made the Vjosa river famous around the world, with even actor Leonardo DiCaprio expressing his support for the campaign through his Instagram. It targeted politicians at both the national level of Albania and the European Union, aiming to put international pressure on these politicians to officially declare the Vjosa river in Albania the first Wild River National Park of Europe: *"The world is watching, Edi Rama [Albania's prime minister]!"* (SavetheBlueHeartofEurope, 2021). With people all over the world advocating for the

conservation of the Vjosa river, Albanian decision-makers were forced to consider the option of moving away from hydropower development on the Vjosa river.

The aim of such actions is to redirect society's support as pressure to decision-makers: *"We organized actions on the street as well, to basically generate the support by the general public and to somehow direct that as a pressure towards the ones making decisions"* (Civil Society NGO #2). Similar to the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition believes that politics is all about power, with public opinion having considerable influence on political decision-making. But where the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition uses this channel to make science more influential in the political arena, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition builds on public opinion as a direct leverage tool for national politicians. Agents of this discourse coalition believe that, by getting citizens in society to support their subject position on hydropower development, their discursive agency among decision-makers would increase. This would manifest in that when decision-makers are able to see how many people in society are supporting their subject position on hydropower construction, decision-makers would be forced to shift their own subject position away from hydropower development.

> *"Small pieces, small actions from all different places, small, little, like people, ordinary people, individuals. That will bring the change, because then it's going to be easier for some politician to understand okay, so there is a lot of people involved in these actions, maybe I can do the same and they will maybe vote for me, because all the politicians, they want power. And who gives them power? It's us. So if we are in numbers protecting our country, then they will be on our side"* (Activist #1).

Some agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition believe that societal pressure can also help with increasing the transparency around specific hydropower projects. These agents argue that, by raising awareness in society about issues regarding lack of consultation and inclusion for hydropower projects, they can influence how companies, decision-makers and governmental ministries and institutions are perceived by citizens. This means that some agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition utilize public opinion to reach more transparency in hydropower governance, as such exposure is considered to potentially threaten agents' public image.

> *"Our strategy is that, if we make a noise in the media that we are fighting for it, even at the higher level, then these people will respond, because we have sent letters to the DFC, which is a corporate financial corporation in United States, who is financing Bechtel to do Skavica dam. They have not responded to us. We have sent the complaint letter since July. They're not responding to us. But if I'm going to go in the media now and I'm making noise about this, they would respond to us. Because then there will be force from the public image to cooperate with us"* (Local citizen #1).

Various agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition complement actions aimed at raising awareness in society with lobbying at national and international levels. As the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition tries to redirect public opinion as pressure towards decision-makers, multiple agents of this discourse coalition are involved in organizing

meetings with relevant decision-makers (e.g. prime minister, minister of environment). In such meetings, these agents try to convince the decision-makers that moving away from hydropower development would be more beneficial for their country, mobilizing public opinion to show society's support for their subject position. The aim of lobbying is thus to make society's perspective, and thereby the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition's subject position, heard at the level of decision-making, thereby influencing decision-makers in such a way that it leads to changes in hydropower governance. As explained by local citizen #1, lobbying can be understood as a way *'to make our way to be heard possibly in the U.S. Senate, if we can in the Government of Albania, in the Parliament, or in European Union if we can, also to be heard somewhere where many lawmakers make a decision'*.

> *"[Policy work] can be very delicate. You have to know who to approach, at what moment. Organize meetings with relevant decision makers can be very frustrating, but sometimes it is very helpful. That's also a big deal" (*Environmental NGO #1).

However, not all agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition express an interest in participating at the policy-level. Instead, these agents argue that their skills are more oriented towards the aim of raising awareness in society. When asked about how the organization has been involved at the policy-level, civil society NGO #1 explains: *"In a way that's not really what we are good at. We tried doing that in our first years, but then realized that our strength is more into making events and getting awareness on a higher level"*. Therefore, they try to raise awareness about what they believe to be the externalities associated with hydropower, which other agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition are then able to use to pressure decision-makers into desired policy changes. This closely relates to this discourse coalition's strategy of coalition building, in which agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition build on each other's strengths by dividing tasks.

6.3.4. Organizational strategies

The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition targets political institutions through its organizational strategies. Through their organizational strategies, this discourse coalition raises questions about the administration and management of policies related to hydropower and also about how law enforcement is controlled in Balkan countries. Agents of this discourse coalition hereby emphasize the lack of consultation and inclusion in decision-making processes surrounding hydropower development.

The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition questions how decisions regarding hydropower development are made in Balkan countries. Multiple agents of this discourse coalition point out that many decisions on hydropower development are made behind closed doors. This is considered to have a negative effect on the transparency of hydropower decision-making.

> *"And then, there has been no public consultation, no notification. I have sent many times myself, in the name of my organization [..], to the government, to respond to certain requirements. They have never responded"* (Local Citizen #1).

This relates to this discourse coalition's questioning on how public participation processes are organized. Agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition argue that there is nothing wrong with the procedure for public participation per se, but that the actual execution of such processes is flawed. As outlined in section …, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition is convinced that local citizens are not included in what are called public processes. They argue that official procedures for a public participation process are not being followed by the hydropower investors. This means that there would be no democratic approach to decision-making; instead, decision-making is believed to happen unilaterally between the governments' relevant ministries and hydropower investors.

> *"It [democratic procedures] has to deal with the public consultation on these development projects that they call hydropower, the dam building. They are not really following all the legal procedures for participatory approach on the decision making, meaning that the local community, even sometimes local governments, are being left outside of the decision making process, which is usually centralized in the capital and is coming from the central political power like ministries or agencies"* (Environmental NGO #5).

Some agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition consider this lack of consultation and inclusion in decision-making to be the result of Balkan countries' history as socialist countries. They argue that Balkan energy companies are historically used to making top-down decisions, with energy generation being a priority that required no consultation.

> *"When it comes to national energy companies, they traditionally don't feel the need to discuss their plans with anybody ,because they are used to being the single company that makes all of the decisions. It's a bit of a, I would say, a remnant of the system that was in place when the region basically was one country, a former Yugoslavia. […]. You did whatever was necessary to build it and this mindset still exists with the companies, even 30 years after the war, where if we say that we need energy, then we need energy and then we will build. So the idea of participatory decision making, or at least, consultations does not exist in the region"* (Environmental NGO #4).

This understanding of decision-making on energy-related topics is believed to still exist today, with the government often not disclosing information on hydropower projects from the start. This means that information on hydropower projects would regularly become available only after public participation processes have already occurred and the construction permit has been issued. Resultingly, agents of this discourse coalition explain that local citizens will only become aware of a hydropower project after decisions regarding the project are made and/or construction has already started. As such, proactively engaged actions by local communities often occur after the decision-making process on a hydropower project has already finished, therefore manifesting in outrage and protests. Environmental NGO #4 explains how such delayed action relates to limited information sharing: *"But this has to do very much also with the system of information, informing and information sharing, where you really don't have an*

opportunity to find out what's happening and sometimes you really are forced to react after the fact".

Therefore, the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition strive for a shift in hydropower governance, oriented towards better inclusion of affected citizens/communities. They argue that citizens should play a central role in decision-making processes on hydropower development and its surrounding policies, claiming that this is a fundamental right when decisions are being made about people's home: *"I feel that in today's world human rights need to be considered and we cannot just ignore it like that"* (Local citizen #1). Such involvement should start with the engagement of citizens in deciding on what type of energy should be generated in the region. Agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition believe that Balkan government automatically opt for hydropower development in their country, with no sufficient consideration of alternative energy sources. They argue that instead, overviews of each energy source's characteristics need to be created for all energy sources that are possible in a region, to compare and evaluate what source of energy would be the most sustainable and beneficial. Citizens should be able to voice their opinion on what source of energy has their preference: *"And then ask citizens, they are basically financing all of that, what to do. And it's never… The problem is, they always push just hydro"* (Civil Society NGO #1). Civil engagement in hydropower decision-making is considered to be self-evident by this discourse coalition, since citizens are paying for the development of renewable energy through their tax-paying and local communities also by experiencing the impacts of such a development.

> *"So to have at least a dialogue. Because we don't have even a communication with nobody, they are not communicating with Dibra, they're not communicating with our concern. Even though we voice our concerns, there is no dialogue"* (Local citizen #1).

7. Discussion

This chapter will further analyze and synthesize the results presented in chapters 5 and 6 in relation to the analytical heuristic of the Discursive Agency Approach (DAA) and discuss the findings within the wider literature available. Section 7.1. explains how to understand the conflict on hydropower development as a discursive struggle over the means for sustainability. Then, section 7.2. answers the sub research questions of this study, with section 7.3. analyzing the new insights this research has produced and how this contributes to existing theory on hydropower. Moreover, section 7.4. raises new questions that have come to the fore based on this research. Section 7.5. then dives into the methodological limitations of this study, and lastly, section 7.6. provides suggestions for future research.

7.1.The hydropower debate as a discursive struggle over sustainability

This research illustrates how conflicts surrounding hydropower can be understood as a discursive struggle over the meaning of and the means for sustainability; while agreement exists among agents that there is a need for more sustainability in the energy sector, a discursive struggle has arisen about what this sustainability would look like in practice. Hydropower conflicts hereby show similarities to discursive struggles on conservation as described by Albrecht (2018), with overall agreement on the general goal but with diverging visions on what would be the most suitable approach for reaching this goal. In this regard, the debate on hydropower development in the Balkans is about whether or not hydropower can be seen as a suitable pathway to a more sustainable energy sector, with the Water Batter discourse promoting hydropower as a necessary tool for a sustainable energy transition and the Save the Blue Heart of Europe and Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse claiming that hydropower should not be categorized as a sustainable energy source due to its impacts on environment and people. Understanding the hydropower debate as a struggle over the meaning of sustainability shows how conflicts on energy matters can easily turn into conflicts on sustainability, due to different understandings of sustainability. It illustrates how *'the pursuit of sustainability then becomes a source of conflict'* (Fisher & Rucki, 2017, p. 269).

7.2. Conflicts on hydropower's sustainability status

7.2.1. Main storylines on hydropower development in the Balkans

Firstly, in relation to storylines, the hydropower boom in the Balkans has given rise to a variety of discourses on these water infrastructures. This study has identified three discourses on hydropower development in the Balkans: (1) the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse, (2) the Water Battery discourse and (3) the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse. The storylines presented in this study reveal different understandings of sustainability. This study shows that while all three discourses include elements of the three pillars of sustainability (i.e. environmental, social and economic) in their storylines, each discourse does so to a different extent. Similar to the different frameworks and models that exist to assess the sustainability of hydropower practices, discourse coalitions emphasize a different pillar of

sustainability regarding the construction of hydropower. The storylines of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse demonstrate an emphasis on the environmental component of sustainability, underscoring riverine ecosystems, their biodiversity and beauty as critical elements to protect from hydropower development. The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse's storylines target the social and economic elements of sustainability, focusing on hydropower's negative economic and cultural impacts as experienced by people living near these plants. By focusing on both local environments and local people, the storylines of these two discourses combined employ the four main motives for hydropower resistance that have been categorized by Escobar (2006) and other studies on energy justice: (1) local ecology, (2) local economy, (3) culture and (4) decision-making. Then, the Water Battery discourse coalition emphasizes the economic and environmental pillars of sustainability in their storylines, considering how hydropower can benefit Balkan countries' economies and security while simultaneously protecting the climate. This challenges the reasoning of Atkins and Hope (2021) that the main argument for hydropower implementation today is fundamentally different from the one used in the 20th century. Instead, this study demonstrates that achieving economic development remains an important motive for hydropower development, with the testimony to hydropower's green nature having become an amplifier of this discourse rather than the provision of a replacing motive.

Such different interpretations of the concept of sustainability contribute to the complexity of the discursive struggle surrounding hydropower development in the Balkans. It brings to the fore the question often asked within the literature about what sustainability entails, and adding to that, how sustainability performances can be measured. This study rejects the idea that hydropower's sustainability can automatically be assumed based on a project's size category, with small-scale hydropower projects only resulting in small impacts (Abbasi & Abbasi, 2011). It supports the argument of Kaunda et al. (2012), Del Bene et al. (2018) and others that such assumptions regarding small-scale hydropower are based on an optimistic, uncritical "small is beautiful" ideology, as this study found no evidence that the discursive struggle on small-scale hydropower development is less severe in the Balkans. In line with the reasoning of the IPCC (2012) that a hydropower project's size category is no suitable predictor of its impacts or characteristics, this study argues that size categories are also no indicator on how a project will be received within society. Instead, the sustainability status of small-scale hydropower projects seems to be just as controversial as large-scale hydropower projects, with small-scale hydropower development also being subjected to fierce resistance and debate in Balkan countries.

7.2.2. Strategic practices to reach discursive hegemony

When understanding hydropower conflicts as discursive struggles over sustainability interpretations, discourse coalitions aim to make their position regarding hydropower's sustainability status dominant in society by undertaking a wide mixture of strategic practices.

The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition mainly builds on the discursive practices of normative power, re- and de-issuing and scientification in their fight for discursive

hegemony. This discourse coalition uses normative power to present Balkan rivers as 'pristine' and 'wild', thereby dividing European rivers into rivers that are homogeneous and impeded by manmade barriers (i.e. other European rivers) and rivers that are unique, of a higher value and therefore worth saving (i.e. Balkan rivers). Agents of this discourse coalition build on the language of science to substantiate their claim regarding Balkan rivers' unparalleled ecological value, while showing how hydropower would threaten these miracles. Through re- and de-issuing, they aim to show that such a threat to Balkan rivers' natural state would be for nothing, claiming that hydropower cannot be seen as the solution to issues of energy security and a sustainable energy system in the face of climate change. Additionally, the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition relies on governance strategies, building on national, European Union and Pan-European laws and regulation, to influence hydropower decision-making and bring new agents and institutions into the struggle on hydropower development that support their subject position on hydropower's unsustainable character.

The Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition mainly employs the discursive practices of normative power, rationalization, emotionalization and delegitimation to aim to reach discursive hegemony with their subject position on hydropower's sustainability. This discourse coalition employs normative power to describe their own agents and their intentions through concepts with positive connotations (e.g. justice and freedom), while they describe the Water Battery discourse coalition and their intentions by using terms that hold negative connotations in society (e.g. selfish, exploitive, corrupt). They hereby create a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate agents, simultaneously framing the debate on hydropower development as a fight between the powerful and the powerless. Agents of this discourse coalition build on delegitimation and emotionalization strategies to illustrate to the wider public how the Water Battery discourse coalition does not keep their promises regarding hydropower development, further strengthening such divisions. Agents of this discourse coalition build on governance strategies to influence whose knowledge is seen as legitimate at the level of policy-making, aiming to redirect societal pressure to decision-makers in order to make societal perspectives more important in hydropower governance.

The joint goal of protecting Balkan rivers against hydropower development has resulted in a powerful discourse coalition of environmentalists and civil society actors. It has enabled the agents in these discourse coalitions to raise awareness in society, while also targeting political decision-makers and institutions. The Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition specializes in what Antadze & Gujaraidze (2021) describe as institutional means, focusing on official channels of communication, while the Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalition emphasizes extra-institutional means, going beyond such channels to reach discursive agency. This extends the reasoning of Huber and Joshi (2015) and Antadze and Gujaraidze (2021), who argue that extra-institutional means only become necessary when institutional means are regarded as insufficient and/or they are undermined by hydropower proponents. Instead, this study claims that institutional and extra-institutional means can work complementary to one another; expanding the platforms for political expression enables

these discourse coalitions to put pressure on decision-makers from multiple institutional and non-institutional directions.

The Water Battery discourse coalition mainly builds on the discursive strategies of normative power, re-and de-issuing, rationalization and delegitimation. Such discursive strategies aim to create what Li (2007) calls "narratives of improvement", connecting hydropower to green growth and development opportunities. Similar to the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition, this discourse coalition uses normative power to set Balkan rivers apart from other European rivers; they argue that European rivers are fully developed and therefore void of new hydropower opportunities, while Balkan rivers so far remain empty but full of potential for hydropower development. Simultaneously, agents of this discourse coalition frame hydropower as a necessary, superior source of energy compared to other (renewable) energy sources. To strengthen such representations, they build on strategies of rationalization to support claims on Balkan rivers' hydropower potential and hydropower's superior technical and economic characteristics and on re- and de-issuing, to demonstrate how hydropower could play an important role in solving issues related to economic development in relation to climate change. The Water Battery discourse coalition hereby aims to legitimize hydropower implementation by discursively presenting it as a technical intervention that is necessary for Balkan countries' transition to a sustainable energy system. This fits a wider trend of development project implementation that has already been described by Ferguson (1994) in 1994, who introduced the term anti-politics to illustrate how politically-sensitive development projects are often introduced as a neutral, technical mission to curb resistance.

By illustrating how discourse coalitions employ various strategic practices to reach discursive hegemony with their position on hydropower's sustainability status, this study extends Hensengerth's argument (2017) that hydropower conflicts are often about forms of modernization and development, claiming that truths on sustainability also form an important basis for such conflicts. It hereby shows the increased focus on sustainability in relation to development that has come with the Brundtland report of the WCED (1987), that connects development to sustainability. While sustainable development is today a crucial component of development practices (Sneddon et al., 2006), with widespread agreement that such development can be understood as a 'good' way forward (Lima & Partidario, 2020), it should not be underestimated that its sustainability component can be at the heart of (environmental) conflicts.

7.2.3. Differences and Similarities in Strategic Practices

Differences in strategic practices described in this study can be explained by considering the (self-)ascribed characteristics of each discourse coalition and/or the platform where they want to gain discursive agency. Due to such differences, some agents are unwilling to participate in particular strategic practices, while emphasizing others. Many agents of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe discourse coalition perceive themselves as science-based, environmental actors, and are mainly involved in building discursive agency among policy-

makers; they therefore emphasize strategic practices informed by science, while refraining from delegitimation strategies to protect future collaborations with opposing agents. Agents of the Socio-Economic Livelihoods discourse coalition, on the other hand, consider themselves to be organizations connected to the people and are more interested in raising awareness on hydropower's externalities at the level of society. They therefore turn more towards discursive practices of emotionalization, delegitimating and rationalization, since they believe such strategies are more understandable and attractive for the general public.

But this study also illustrates that both sides of the hydropower debate also employ a similar set of strategic practices, using similar language and concepts to frame hydropower's (un)sustainability. Both the Save the Blue Heart of Europe and the Water Battery discourse coalition build on normative power to describe Balkan rivers as unique for their emptiness, build on science to rationalize the debate and connect hydropower to the issue of climate change to (de)legitimize its implementation. Similarly, both the Water Battery and the Socio-Economic Livelihoods discourse coalition look at hydropower's contributions to economic development and try to rationalize the debate by building on economic language, but interpret hydropower's economic influence in opposite ways. Considering these similarities in line with the resurgence of hydropower in the 21st century after three decades of cautiousness due to concerns about its sustainability (Anshelm & Simons, 2016), it can be questioned to what extent pro-hydropower discourse coalitions have developed their strategic practices in a direct response to accusations regarding hydropower's sustainability status. This study illustrates that, rather than continuing to solely promote hydropower as a tool for achieving economic development, sustainability concerns regarding hydropower in the Balkans have been internalized by the Water Battery discourse coalition. In doing so, they have, similar to what Lang et al. (2019) observed in relation to the carbon offset market, discursively reinvented hydropower in such a way that it serves as a tool for sustainability rather than being a barrier to it. Agents of the Water Battery discourse coalition thereby utilize concerns about sustainability as an additional argument for hydropower implementation. This brings to the fore the question whether the discursive struggle on hydropower development in the Balkans might result in what Simoens et al. (2022) describe as a "discursive lock-in", since the Water Battery discourse coalition has co-opted the concept of sustainability from anti-hydropower discourses, and all discourse coalitions now build on the concept of sustainability to reach discursive hegemony.

7.3. Lessons from the Discursive Agency Approach

Applying a discursive approach to hydropower conflicts in the Balkans demonstrates that understanding hydropower conflicts cannot be narrowed down to a disagreement regarding its costs and benefits. When analyzing hydropower conflicts in relation to hydropower discourses, the incomplete reasoning of such utilitarian analyses becomes visible. Environmental and energy justice literature have already pointed out particular gaps regarding sustainability assessments' focus on a mere mapping of hydropower's costs and benefits, addressing injustices that remain unacknowledged in these assessments (Kruger &

McCauley, 2020). However, such studies on hydropower conflicts neglect to consider how hydropower development, and therefore its sustainability, can be understood as socially constructed. By studying hydropower conflicts through a discursive approach, it is shown that sustainability assessments come with particular ideas about what sustainability entails (Del Bene et al., 2018), but that in practice, different meanings of sustainability exist. Hydropower fits differently in each discourse coalition's understanding of sustainability, meaning that the importance of hydropower for a sustainable energy system is also perceived differently. Rather than studying whether hydropower can be categorized as sustainable, a discursive approach illustrates how the question regarding hydropower's sustainability is more complex; this study shows how hydropower conflicts revolve around what sustainability in relation to hydropower entails, what criteria would be needed to assess it, and what methods would be appropriate to measure this. Discursive approaches thereby acknowledge the existence of multiple truths in relation to hydropower's sustainability, recognizing that today's sustainability status of hydropower in international environmental policy is a *'truth that is made true'* (Boelens, Shah & Bruins, 2019, p. 10). This means that such a truth regarding hydropower's sustainability status can also be unmade, i.e. truth can be made untrue.

By paying attention to the interrelationship between agency and discourse, the Discursive Agency Approach indicates that hydropower conflicts should be understood as continuous struggles over hydropower's established sustainability status in environmental policy. Following Boelens et al.'s argument (2019) that conflicts about water infrastructures *'are focal points of intense knowledge battlefields'* (p. 3), the Discursive Agency Approach highlights how discourse coalitions try to control and influence discourses on hydropower's sustainability status. Where hydropower conflicts have mostly been studied through the acts of resistance it evokes, with such anti-dam struggles being described as acts of political agency (Huber & Joshi, 2015), the Discursive Agency Approach shows how such studies focus on only a small niche of acts that agents can undertake to express political agency and establish their position as political truth, while also, for the most part, neglecting the agency of agents aiming to maintain the institutionalized discourse. Through its strategic practices, it indicates that agents often have an extensive repertoire of strategies available, making the understanding of hydropower conflicts even more complicated than sustainability assessments and studies on hydropower resistance make them out to be. This extends Hajer's argument (1995) that, in order to understand environmental conflicts, the distinct definitions and meanings of the environmental problem itself should be grasped; the Discursive Agency Approach demonstrates that in order to fully understand environmental conflicts, it should be comprehended how each agent/discourse coalition aims to make their own position on the problem function as truth.

In short, studying hydropower conflicts with the analytical heuristic of the Discursive Agency Approach demonstrates a more complete understanding of the discursive struggle surrounding hydropower, and the role that agents play in this struggle. It indicates that sustainability assessments and studies on hydropower resistance have not been able to come to a full understanding of hydropower conflicts, not taking into account the existence of

multiple realities regarding hydropower and its sustainability and/or the broad variety of acts of political agency available to agents to influence hydropower discourses.

7.4. Open questions

While applying the analytical heuristic of Discursive Agency Approach to the discursive struggle on hydropower development in the Balkans has resulted in new insights regarding the role of agents in the discursive struggle on hydropower development, it also leaves particular questions unanswered and raises new ones. The most obvious one in this regard is the remaining question about what sustainable hydropower would look like in practice. This research has outlined various storylines regarding hydropower, thereby demonstrating the controversiality of its assumed sustainability and its benefits. Such differences in perceptions indicate the difficulty of defining sustainability in relation to the hydropower sector; what one agent considers to be sustainable hydropower, does not necessarily fit another agent's definition of sustainability. It raises the question on how to determine what sustainability in relation to hydropower entails. Should the focus be on impacts for local populations leaving near energy projects, or should greater importance be given to the impacts on the environment? Should there be a middle ground in this definition, whereby all agents compromise in some way on their perception of sustainability? Or is determining sustainable hydropower practice a matter of following an official definition with corresponding practices that has been developed by the policy-system top-down, being mainly based on expert knowledge? The Discursive Agency Approach leaves such ethical questions unanswered.

Also, as this study has indicated the importance of pristineness, the question arises on how it can be decided which rivers are worth saving from hydropower and which ones are not. Balkan rivers are depicted as unique and unparalleled, and their untouched nature would then support the conviction that these rivers are worth saving. Does this then mean that some rivers are more valuable than others? Does this value influence the right to save specific rivers? This also brings to the fore the question of how the value of a river can be determined. What indicators should be included in such a measurement; should attention only be paid to its ecological value, or should also economic, cultural and/or social indicators be included in such an evaluation? As Minister Kumbaro, Albanian minister of culture and environment, asked: *"For the rest of the developed world who have come to Albania and are telling us we must save the Vjosa: Why is it one of the last wild rivers? Where are the others? Who's next?"* (Baker, 2022).

7.5. Methodological implications

There are several limitations to the execution of this research that need to be considered.

Firstly, the data representation of this study can be questioned, as particular biases are present in the data collection. When reaching out to a broad variety of agents qualifying as potential research participants, it appeared that some groups of agents were more open to this request than others. Where non-governmental organizations and scientists have been

willing to engage in conversations about their role in the discursive struggle on hydropower development in the Balkans, most governmental agencies, institutions and companies (i.e. agents considered to be in favor of hydropower) have not responded to the multiple attempts made to schedule an interview. Due to the unreachability of agents in the Water Battery discourse coalition, these agents have (with one exception) not been interviewed for this research. Instead their subject position, storylines and strategic practices as presented in this study have been based mostly on policy documents, websites, press releases and the statements of other agents, to represent them in thus study. Resultingly, this underrepresentation of agents in favor of hydropower development in the Balkans had created a particular bias in the results, with subject position, storylines and strategic practices of anti-hydropower discourse coalitions being more thickly described than those of the pro-hydropower discourse coalitions. This bias has been further enforced by using the method of snowball sampling. While this method has made the finding of research participants willing to participate easier (e.g. agents that work for smaller organizations and/or are less present in the media, and have therefore been missed in initial analysis), it also creates a form of sampling bias. Agents mostly forwarded the contact information of their direct partners and/or other agents in the same field of work. This means that research participants referred to agents who have the same subject position, adhering to similar storylines on hydropower development, and are therefore part of the same discourse coalition. Due to the difficulties with accessing agents from the Water Batter discourse coalition, it was not possible to apply the method of snowball sampling for the inclusion of pro-hydropower subject positions. In the end, snowball sampling hereby contributed to the further inclusion of agents against hydropower development in the Balkans, while also resulting in a certain bias in shared perspectives regarding hydropower development in the Balkans.

Lastly, the use of semi-structured interviews resulted in an extensive, complex set of data, meaning that choices have been made in what aspects to include. On top of this, this data has been interpreted with the analytical heuristic of the Discursive Agency Approach, whereby results have been categorized using the four dimensions of the DAA. The interpretations and choices could potentially have resulted in a selection bias, whereby other researchers would have categorized the data differently (e.g. selecting different strategic practices from the data and/or placing these strategies into different categories of strategic practices). To mitigate differences in categorizations, multiple parts of interview transcripts have been recoded, to check for potential improvements in the coding tree, and actions for which categorization was not entirely clear were discussed during meetings with the supervisor.

7.6. Future research

Based on this study, its methodological implications and the new questions it has raised, multiple recommendations for future research can be made.

Firstly, this research has tried to analyze the roles that various agents play in the discursive struggle surrounding hydropower development in the Balkans by using the

analytical heuristic of the Discursive Agency Approach. However, as discussed in section 7.5., incorporating all participating agents in this study has proven to be difficult, resulting in a biased representation of this discursive struggle. While this study has aimed to present the Water Battery's discourse coalition's subject position, storylines and strategic practices by analyzing policy documents, websites, press releases and the statements of opposing agents, this analysis can be strengthened by speaking to pro-hydropower agents directly. In this light, it is recommended to do a similar study focusing on the discourses, storylines and strategies of agents that are in favor of hydropower development in the Balkans, to obtain a more complete and representative understanding of their subject position on hydropower development and the role they play in this struggle. Following this, differences and similarities between agents' storylines and subject positions can be analyzed more thoroughly, paving the path towards more inclusive hydropower governance. It is recommended to go into the field rather than doing interviews online; this allows the researcher to approach employees from hydropower plants and decision-makers directly by visiting their work places, which makes it more difficult to ignore requests for a conversation.

Moreover, due to personal circumstances and organizational difficulties at the beginning of this study, the initial plan to adopt a case study design on one specific hydropower project for this study has been modified in the current study-design. However, following this explorative study on the discursive struggle surrounding hydropower development in the Balkans, it is recommended to conduct a study with a (multiple-)case study design. While this research has gained initial insights in the role of various agents regarding the discursive struggle surrounding hydropower development in the Balkans, an in-depth case study design would allow for a more thick description of the storylines that exist around the development of HPPs and the strategic practices agents in a specific case use to try to reach discursive hegemony. In this regard, it would allow for the identification and illustration of agents' role in the discursive struggle on hydropower development both in a specific context and in relation to the broader discursive struggle surrounding hydropower.

Lastly, this study brought to the fore the differences regarding water management on the European continent; whereas the Balkans are now characterized by the development of obstacles within their rivers, other countries in Europe are oriented towards dam removal. Following this, it is recommended to perform a broader discourse analysis regarding the topic of hydropower development on the European continent, to gain insight into this difference of focus and to uncover discursive global patterns regarding the transition on river management, going from free, unmanaged rivers to heavily controlled, engineered waters and now back to again making space for the river.

8. Conclusion

This chapter contains the conclusion of this research. Section 8.1. provides an answer to the main research question of this study, and section 8.2. provides recommendations for future policy development based on this research.

8.1. Answering the main research question

The aim of this research was *to better understand the discursive struggles that have emerged in relation to hydropower in the Balkans, and the role that various agents play in this struggle to achieve discursive hegemony.* Through an extensive analysis, this research illustrates how the conflict on hydropower development can be more broadly understood as a discursive struggle over meanings of and the means for sustainability. Discourse coalitions take different positions on how hydropower would fit into their understanding of sustainability, with the Water Batter discourse coalition framing hydropower as a tool for reaching sustainable economic development, and the Save the Blue Heart of Europe and Socio-Economic Livelihood discourse coalitions emphasizing what they perceive to be hydropower's negative externalities on environment and society. In order to then better understand hydropower conflicts, it is important to consider these different understandings of hydropower in relation to sustainability.

To achieve the aim of this research, this research has tried to answer the main research question: *How do different agents play a role in the discursive struggle surrounding hydropower in the Balkans?* By analyzing agents' subject positions, storylines and strategic practices in relation to the discursive struggle on hydropower development in the Balkans, this research demonstrates that only focusing on hydropower's costs and benefits is not sufficient to assess hydropower's sustainability. Understanding hydropower conflicts as conflicts of sustainability show how each discourse coalition aims to make their understanding of hydropower's sustainability status hegemonic in society. Pro-hydropower agents aim to reach this objective by promoting hydropower projects as a neutral, technical intervention that is necessary for a sustainable energy system, while anti-hydropower agents aim to protect Balkan rivers through environmentally scientific-based practices aimed at institutional channels or by building on socially attractive practices that intend to raise awareness in society.

While analyses of cost and benefits of development interventions such as water infrastructures are the conventional method to measure sustainability performances, this study shows that such an analysis should be seen as a last step in assessing the sustainability of development interventions. Instead, in order to come to a complete understanding of environmental conflicts, more emphasis should be given to agents' understanding of sustainability, how a development intervention fits within this understanding and how agents are trying to make their own position regarding an intervention's sustainability function as truth.

8.2. Policy Recommendations

Based on this research, several recommendations for future policy development have been formulated. Firstly, there should be more recognition within policy-making for alternative discourses and their supporting agents, in order to prevent the escalation of social conflicts that exist around the construction of hydropower plants. In this light, building bridges should be a priority within policy-making, to mitigate the growing divide that can be found in hydropower debates. A first step in bridging this gap relates to what Luo (2022) describes as 'coalition bridging'; to create a space for communication and negotiation where agents supporting different discourses on hydropower development can discuss their standpoints on hydropower development today and what they envision for the future. This recommendation on recognition closely relates to the second recommendation, arguing that a way needs to be found through which local citizens who will be affected by hydropower projects can be better included in decision-making processes. As local citizens are the ones who would suffer directly from hydropower impacts, they should play an important role in hydropower decision-making.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Research Participants

This table shows a full overview of the people that have been interviewed during this research. All interviews have conducted online.

Research Participant	**Date**
Environmental NGO #1	July 14, 2022
Environmental NGO #2	October 4, 2022
Environmental NGO #3	October 24, 2022
Environmental NGO #4	November 24, 2022
Environmental NGO #5	November 18, 2022
Scientist #1	October 24, 2022
Activist #1	November 23, 2022
Activist #2	November 30, 2022
Civil Society NGO #1	October 4. 2022
Civil Society NGO #2	October 18, 2022
Local Citizen #1	October 10, 2022
Association #1	November 1, 2022

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Name participant:
Organization:

A broader mapping of the struggle in the region

1. Can you give me a short overview on the history of the policy debate about hydropower in the Western Balkans since the 1990s? What were key events?
2. What is the context in which the current hydropower boom in the Western Balkans should be understood?
3. What different perspectives on hydropower development exist in the region?
4. Who can be considered the most important actors participating in the debate?
5. Who supports what position on hydropower development in the region?
6. At what policy level do actors aim to influence policy-making?
7. In what ways do different actors work together in the region to promote their standpoint and reach their goals in relation to hydropower?
8. What is the role of science in today's hydropower debate in the Western Balkans?
9. What is the role of emotion in today's hydropower debate in the Western Balkans?
10. What changes have occurred in the last decade in the types of actions that actors undertake to promote their own standpoint on hydropower?

Interviewee's own role in the discursive struggle

1. What is your/the organization's view on hydropower development in the Western Balkans?
2. Can you describe your key arguments for having this view on hydropower?
3. What actions are you/your organization currently undertaking to promote this perspective?
4. Who are your main partners in such actions?
5. How do you build on science to influence the debate? And emotions?
6. In what ways do you/your organization try to counter and discredit other standpoints?
7. Within society, who do you believe shares a similar standpoint as you?
8. What characteristics would you ascribe the group of actors following this standpoint on hydropower?
9. How would you describe the ultimate/perfect outcome of the debate on hydropower?

The opposition

1. Who of the other actors in the debate do you consider to be an opponent/someone with a completely different position on hydropower?
2. What perspective on hydropower does this group of actors follow?
3. How would you describe this group in terms of characteristics and values that they follow?
4. How do they build on science to promote their standpoint? And emotion?
5. In what ways do these opponents exclude or ignore issues that you consider to be important?
6. Through what actions have other stakeholders tried to counter and discredit your own standpoint?
7. In what ways do these actors collaborate on such actions?

Closing questions

1. Is there anything we have not mentioned but what would have been important in the context of our conversation for me to understand the controversy better?
2. Can you name three experts you believe I need to interview in any case on my topic?
3. If so, what are the best ways to contact them?

Thank you so much for your time and valuable insights.