**Role of environmental protection NGO’s, and public finance support within the national park Galicica in Macedonia - actors, audience or agents**

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Public participation has been established as a sound mechanism for environmental policy improvement. The enforcement stage of policy implementation should also generate most citizen involvement through the economic sustainable way.

Despite the fact there is no official or unofficial group in Macedonia that is opposing environmental protection policy as well as environmental protection measures some of the interest groups in society might see the environment as a good background for settling of accounts among the political opponents or business groups. As per international surveys and analysis Macedonia is a country with limited media freedom. Although previous can be raised as a question itself regarding the environmental point of view we can see that one of the key tools of the environmental protection can be media awareness raising but in order real audience to be reached and objectively demanded goals to be reached, there is a need for unbiased reporting and with respect both of the laws in the area as well as laws of environmental science.

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**Green politics and Green parties in Macedonia and the media**

Despite the fact there is no official or unofficial group in Macedonia that is opposing environmental protection policy as well as environmental protection measures some of the interest groups in society might see the environment as a good background for settling of accounts among the political opponents or business groups. As per international surveys and analysis Macedonia is a country with limited media freedom[[1]](#footnote-1). Although previous can be raised as a question itself regarding the environmental point of view we can see that one of the key tools of the environmental protection can be media awareness raising but in order real audience to be reached and objectively demanded goals to be reached, there is a need for unbiased reporting and with respect both of the laws in the area as well as laws of environmental science.

Macedonia is young democracy with 27 years of independency. During that period of time local political system had seen several tens of parties although voting body is consisted of around 2 million voters and the overall turnout was around 50%. Officially there is only one political party defining itself as a predominantly green party (DOM – Demokratska Obnova na Macedonia – Democratic Renewal of Macedonia) although all the parties are declaring that are having high on their agenda the environmental issues. Some might see it as a logical outcome in the country with one of the lowest GDP/per capita ratios in Europe. Certainly it is expected for green trends in politics to get higher attention through the political parties as country develops but phenomena is that for the moment some environmental issues can be seen rather as a questions for political contest than as a urgent need and top priority for the Macedonian society.

High levels of air pollution- one of the highest in Europe and problems in the landfill management with underinvestment in the area due to the subjective and objective reasons are seen by many analyses as top priorities of the country in the field of environmental protection. But real reaction is very calm and the problem persists for decades. Instead there was a heavy reaction both from the political parties and in the media in regards with a problem of a hotel construction site (its gross construction area was less than 1000 square meters) that was started to be built near the shore of the Lake of Ohrid. It became one of the most exploited topics related to environmental protection during the period of 2015 and 2016 and through media perception was created that such an issue has priority nr.1 of the local communities in the field of environment. In the same period of time some heavy environmental incidents happened. For example landfill in Tetovo, one of the largest municipalities in Macedonia with population of more than 100000 citizens was set on fire several times and its microlocation is strictly bordering with urban area of the municipality - densely populated. There was no any kind of responsibility, no infringement no criminal offence even not political responsibility. The green party didn’t reacted at all. In the same time another Municipality experienced the same problem – it was Municipality of Struga with more than 15000 citizens also the municipality that is sharing Lake of Ohrid with the Municipalities of Ohrid, Macedonia as well as Municipality of Podgradec, Albania . The landfill there was set on heavy fire for several times. Also there was no any kind of responsibility and political reaction ending with poor media popularity although the region is bordering one of the three national natural parks in Macedonia commonly as in the case with the landfill of Tetovo. Soon after the tap water provided from the local water supply system in Struga was declared not for drinking. Also there was no reaction for the green factors in the country and even poor or none reaction from the political factors .

**Political and media manipulation in relation with environmental issues**

Political reactions are producing media popularity and environmental awareness raising. However there is no logic for the problems of the air pollution and landfill management to be estimated in the rank of the hotel construction near the lake shore of the protected area. Logic can be found only in the area of a media manipulation and thus building of a public perception for the environmental priorities that are not in line with the country environmental priorities and even more priorities of the Municipalities. In the context all the municipalities in Macedonia are responsible for the environmental issues but officially law demands mostly to adopt Local environmental action plans and to operate the local landfill management systems as well as local water supply systems. Lack of financial issues is one of the most important inheriting factors both on the local regional and national level within the country. But that doesn’t mean that a developing country can avoid the top priorities in the field of environmental issues management. Especially Municipalites are often criticized of not using and even not having capacities to challenge environmental issues. For example Municipality of Ohrid is one of the largest municipalities in Macedonia with the budget of 18 million euro (2016 data). Not more as of 5% of the overall budget in used in the field of environment but the percentage drops to only 2% if administrative costs are deducted. It speaks itself a lot why the environmental protection policies are transferred from real to the virtual and media world where arguments can be distorted more easily and real needs for the environmental issues to be put on the second place during the political contest.

**Construction policy in the Municipality of Ohrid. Real needs vs corruption, populism and politics**

The Municipality of Ohrid is one of the most attractive areas in Macedonia due to the fact that is in bordered by the two national parks the largest natural lake in Macedonia and one of the oldest natural lakes in Europe. Situated on the shores of Lake Ohrid, the town of Ohrid is one of the oldest human settlements in Europe. Built mainly between the 7th and 19th centuries, it has the oldest Slav monastery (St Pantelejmon) and more than 800 Byzantine-style icons dating from the 11th to the end of the 14th century. After those of the Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow, this is considered to be the most important collection of icons in the world. Also the Municipality has strong cultural background as it is one of the cradles of orthodox Christianity. Furthermore it is now for the autonomous architecture and is UNESCO protected site. Protection of the old architecture and culture in one of the UNESCO nomination factors.

Environmental demands and protected area sites might be seen as a limiting factors for urban and spatial planning as well as construction policy. But they are not the only factors. Needs of the people living within the area are to be taken into the consideration. Need for the economic development as a prerequisite for environmental as well as human development also. Although such criteria are already adopted in law treating the issues of the construction planning there is a need for reconsidering them even on a daily basis or it is to be said for the daily politics.

In the same time there is an important business interest for construction in Ohrid having in mind that the price of the real estate goes from 500 to 1,200 EUR per square meter constructed area that is one of the highest prices both with the prices in the capital of Skopje) in Macedonia.

On the other hand property law is stipulated in order to protect one of the basic and constitutional rights of every citizen as well as business in order to manage its property in a best manner for him with no right to violate property of others and national property. Such criteria are widespread in several laws and according to them there is a need for certain procedure to be followed. Macedonian law stipulates such procedure to start with a request for urban planning that can be divided on three levels Spatial Plan of Republic of Macedonia, General urban plan and Detailed urban plan. Depending on the plan as it encounters wider area as the procedure is more complex and time consumable with inclusion of more stakeholders as well as expensive. However there are no considerations and doubts on the procedures both for the Spatial Plan and General urban plan where are all the necessary parameters included regarding the possible types of construction facilities as well as purpose of their use with essential respect of the environmental protection. For many of the stakeholders involve the most difficult part of the urban planning is the detailed urban planning. Once this is for the areas where prices of the real estate are high and there are national parks around it becomes multiplicated problem. But why it can be a problem since all the necessary parameters are already given within the other higher level plans and also there are at least 20 laws strictly enacting how one detailed urban plan should look like even in a UNESCO protected site? For example there are strict parameters on the areas where there is an increased environmental protection as well as parameters on the building capacities- height and length. Detailed urban planning comes to the end of the first stage planning procedure and then comes the second part where the strict plan on the building has been developed within three stages. Finally there is a construction permit issued. Another important point is that there are developed standards enacted as a bylaw in 1993 (Standards for urban planning) in which it is even more precisely stipulated how should one building be designed. Standards are in line with the same standards of the European Union. It seems that there is a small room for manipulation and misuse of the procedure. So it stays that there are two best options to “hack” the system one is the procedure prolongation and second is the environmental standards. It seems that first “bypass” was used very frequently. Macedonian laws are saying that there is a need for procedures to be finished but they did not say when. That is a great opportunity for someone who wants to prolong the procedure with no end date. That was noticed as a problem even in the international reports like doing business reports of the World Bank for the years 2012 and 2013. Government had to react and probably reaction was honest since there was an internet system called e-urbanizam where every citizen of Macedonia can start procedure on the development of the detailed urban planning. Actually procedure can be followed at every stage from any citizen and from any place because it can be smoothly accessed through web page. Also it is to be noticed that (as a reaction to the pressure from the citizens and a public) Government in 2009 has enacted changes in the Law of urban planning that allows citizens to shortcut the complete planning procedure. As a matter effect the businesses or citizens can finance small scale detailed urban plan by itself that doesn’t need to have General urban plan or Detail urban plan and if it is in line with standards for urban planning, it should be approved by Mayor directly and if doesn’t happens there is a fine of 5000 eur for the Mayor. Of course standards were to be respected at all to those plans. Suddenly, vanish reaction by Municipalities happened. Even such law change was disputed to the Constitutional court with the justification that violates the authorization of Municipalities in urban planning. At the end such amendments were abolished by the constitutional court. The game started among the Government, part of Municipalities and Constitutional court (probably politically influenced) that was finished in a way that the scale of space that is to be planned for not less than 2 hectares and there is no possibility for a4 designed objects –that are for the purpose of familiar living. That says only businesses can plan in such a manner while for the citizens has been left small room because they should have or plan for at least 2 hectares and not to plan objects for familiar living. Although such illogic solution within the law is leaving the great room for misinterpretations and corruptive behavior once needed- Municipalities are not in a great position to misuse it. Since it represents an issue another set of changes in the laws were in order to foster the Municipalities to be more efficient with dates. Also fines were set and great empowerment were given to the State Urban Inspectorate to follow whether the dates are respected. It only left environmental criteria to be used to shape the projects on a way environment friendly planning and construction to be misused to trade political, financial or other interests. As mentioned before there are at least 20 laws on environmental issues to be applied within the urban planning. And in the same way all of those matters cannot be well monitored due to the overlaps of procedures lack of capacity for the institutions and lack of political will. As a case what happens in the moment a case study will be given on a construction of a hotel near the shore of Ohrid lake. Hotel was intended to be built on about 20 meters from the lake shore and the building has started once the owner has obtained permit. As soon as construction has started some activities from people identifying themselves as environmentalists have started mainly on the social networks. Facebook campaign was undertaken against the hotel by the organization Ohrid SOS and from physical persons. They were presenting themselves as an unbiased with the solemnly will to protect the environment. Once the internet activities were intensified it was received also support from highly popular internet portals and finally from all the media in the state. Very soon several protest were organized in front of hotel construction site also with full media support although at the protest were not more than 15 people. Finally it triggered action by the state urban planning inspectorate and the construction permit was suspended. Official explanation by inspectorate was that reason for such decision can be found in irregularities in the procedure for permit issuance. On the other side activists were claiming that with the such permit issuance 12 laws in relation with the environmental protection were infringed. The owner of the permit on the other site claimed that his permit was all ok and there is only personal interest and pressure that have contributed to such decision. And normally on the first sight it looks alike classic environmental activism story that have to be greeted. But on the other hand in the meantime several issues were raised in the public and were hard to be answered. Where is organization Ohrid SOS affiliated and who is the leader ? It appeared that this organization didn’t appears to be registered anywhere except on facebook. Once it was asked about the members to legitimize in order to gain better support no member appeared at all. It is also to be notified that within the 27 years of independency no organization or activist was sentenced or prosecuted by the state due to the environmental activities and even there were no any signs showing that it will be done it somebody legitimizes. Soon some rumors appeared in the public that the organization Ohrid SOS is nonexistent and the profile is managed by the opposition party activists. If it is so question that raises from the last is why opposition party didn’t wants to legitimate itself as a protest activities leader and even didn’t want to register organization. The answer can be found that the opposition while was ruling the Municipality has issued tens of construction permits for the buildings on the same area and public didn’t recognizes it as a legitimate representative of environmental activism.

On the same time people declaring themselves as environmental activists started separate activities but also there was no person to actively legitimate. Finally only one person legitimated itself and it appeared that her family is owner of the mansion just neighboring the disputed construction site. [[2]](#footnote-2)Once this was confirmed many people in the public were asking them selves is this initiative honest and are the main actors of those with environmental ideas or only they are protecting their interest ? Probably question was not addressed well as a environmental issue and citizens were disappointed. Furthermore other question raised from such situation. Lake Ohrid has been shared by three municipalities – Municipality of Ohrid in Macedonia, Municipality of Struga in Macedonia and Municipality of Pogradec in Albania. In order to have equal or even balanced approach towards protection of the Lake and through the overall ecosystem, the implementation of environmental law needs to be undertaken from the three Municipalities. From the other hand the case is that more than 130 objects were built up near the lake shore or directly at the lake shore (out of which 30 directly at the lake shore) from the lake side managed by Struga and more than 200 objects were built up near the lake shore (out of which around 50 near the lake side) from the lake side managed by the Municipality of Pogradec within the last 15 years. Macedonia have also signed several agreements with Albania on protection of the Lake of Ohrid. Maybe is difficult for Macedonian environmental activists to challenge and protest against the urbanization of the Lake of Ohrid. But it shouldn’t be a problem to challenge and protest urbanization policy of Municipality of Struga. As mentioned above no site actions were undertaken in regards with landfill management problem in Struga nor was it taken for any other issue that can be considered of high environmental urgency. To be the paradox even bigger in the perimeter of 35 kilometers of shore managed by the Municipality of Ohrid cannot be found more than 1 kilometer of a constructable land that is not belonging to the National Park Galicica that is encompassing the lake (while Galicica holds some 5 kilometers out of 35 that are encompassing the shore) and in the area within the recent 15 years were also built more than 100 objects out of which 20 in the recent 5 years but also there were no reaction from all the relevant bodies nor from any declared environmental activists. Finally it is to be considered what says law on the issue with the hotel and which environmental laws were infringed in order to see the legal position of all the actors is in this environmental case. Actually there are more laws that can be consulted but the main of them is Law on waters (water protection) which says that objects cannot be built if they are closer more than 50 meters from the lake shore of natural lakes as per the article 131 paragraph 4.[[3]](#footnote-3) It appears that there is no compliance of the construction site with this legal article. But around the hotel there are tens of objects that are on the same line from the lake shore. And all of them with are with construction permits issued in periods when the Municipality was governed by different political options. In fact the same law in article 174 paragraph 1 says that objects can be built but only with special permit and there is no limit on the object purposes and dimensions. As from the above it can be mentioned that the problem is more political and even representing private interest while in the same time the objects didn’t have incompliance with the laws mentioned.

In 2010 Macedonia’s government launched law on legalization of illegally constructed objects . Such law allows all the owners that have such objects to legalize them if they have compliance with the actual law. That has given a chance to the owners of illegally constructed objects (such objects were only small portion near the Ohrid lake shore and mostly the objects with overbuilt sites vertically or horizontally) to legalize them.

**Conclusions**

Official environment agenda in Macedonia is often misused by the political and business elites and even from people with other personal interests. One of the key players in this area- Green parties are not present in Macedonia or they are only in trivial manner. Such situation causes serious defects within policy implementation in this key area. As a consequence from the above media are frequently manipulated in regards with green agenda or they are producing the same representing their owner’s interests. Construction sector is one of the sectors where usually environmental policy has been misused thus causing great damage to the environmental agenda in the eyes of the public. For the moment in the developing country such as Macedonia one of the biggest threats to the environmental agenda (together with environmental disinvestment and wrong implementation of regulative ) can be identified as non-inclusion of the economic interests of the poorest parts of population. There is a need for stronger support and even monitoring from the European union to the above mentioned topics in order to ensure that country’s environmental agenda is not a veil for hiding the implementation of private agendas confronting the environmental issues.

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