

Master Thesis

The Vjosa Wild River National Park as a Legal Innovation: Creating Transformative Change in Albanian River Governance



Rebecca Störbrock 0288537

Tatiana Acevero Guerrero

Summary

The Vjosa River in Albania is considered the last European wild river and is a riverine ecosystem of European importance due to its diverse flora and fauna. However, the increasing demand for energy and economic development in Albania has exerted political pressure to install hydropower plants also in the Vjosa River Basin. A coalition of local and international environmental NGOs successfully stopped several hydropower projects on the Vjosa River and has advocated for the establishment of a Vjosa National Park to ensure the integrity of the riverine ecosystem. Against all opposition, in March 2023, the first *Wild River National Park* was declared and led to the establishment of a new legal category of Protected Areas. This legal innovation is a milestone for global nature conservation and comes with implications for Albanian river management more broadly. Therefore, this research examines which lessons can be drawn from the case study of the Vjosa River about a transition in Albanian river governance by employing an exploratory case study design. Theoretically, this question can be examined by applying transition theory and the novel concept of *reparative innovations*. *Reparative innovations* aim at addressing wrongdoings through the process of reparation and facilitate reconciliation by considering historical contexts. The Albanian historical context is characterized by its Communist past, which comes with challenges for the ongoing transition to democracy and EU accession.

Despite the successful National Park campaign, the proper enforcement of the *Wild River National Park* is considered a management challenge for the Albanian government due to weak compliance with national and international environmental standards. Therefore, a *right of nature* approach provides an alternative in cases where environmental law cannot ensure environmental protection. *Legal personhood* for rivers stipulates rights and duties for a river that can be enforced in court and has been applied to rivers around the world. Such an approach has been shown to address historical inequalities in post-colonial contexts, however, this practice has not been explored in a post-Soviet context yet. For this purpose, this research showcases how the declaration of the Vjosa Wild River National Park created favorable conditions for the conferral of legal personhood on the Vjosa River. Stakeholder analysis and semi-structured interviews were used to identify stakeholders' perceptions of the discourse on the Vjosa River and to identify new visions advocated by environmental NGOs, which challenge the current Western growth-oriented regime of Albanian river management. A transition in Albanian river management is becoming more evident and has been accelerated by legal innovations emerging from niches and are supported by landscape actors. This research contributes to the academic debate on transition theory by investigating the role of legal innovations in a transition.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor Tatiana Acevedo Guerrero for believing in this topic and providing her enthusiastic input during our meetings. Special gratitude also applies to my interviewees without whom this research would have been missing valuable and unexpected insights. Their enthusiasm and willingness to connect me with other people in the field made the research process so much more fun and insightful. As this thesis marks the end of student life, I would also like to thank my classmates, who have done a phenomenal job at supporting each other during our thesis struggles and have made study sessions a lot more enjoyable. I will cherish all the memories I made during the two years of this Master and the nice and inspiring people I met on this journey. My parents and friends have been great supporters during this process, and I am more than thankful to start my professional career with all the great advice they have given me.

Table of Contents

1.	Introduction.....	1
2.	Contextual Background.....	3
2.1.	The Albanian Democratization Process and its Challenges	3
2.2.	The Vjosa River as a Source of Political Contestation.....	4
3.	Conceptualizing River Rights	6
3.1.	A Rights-Based Approach to River Management	6
3.2.	Defining Legal Personhood for a River	8
4.	Conceptual Framework	9
4.1.	Research Aim	9
4.2.	Theoretical Framework	9
4.3.	Transition Theory.....	10
4.4.	Transitions through Reparative Innovations.....	11
4.5.	Reparative Environmental Justice	12
5.	Methodology	13
5.1.	Methods	13
5.2.	Methods of Data Collection.....	15
6.	Results	17
6.1.	Stakeholder Analysis	17
6.1.1.	European level.....	17
6.1.2.	National Level.....	20
6.1.3.	Basin Level.....	23
6.1.4.	Other Stakeholders.....	24
7.	Interviews	26
7.1.	List of Interviewees.....	26
7.2.	Stakeholders' Visions.....	26
7.2.1.	Common Visions.....	27
7.2.2.	Conflicting Visions	29
7.3.	Stakeholders' Agency.....	30
8.	Analysis	31
8.1.	Transition Theory.....	31
8.1.1.	Niche Level.....	32
8.1.2.	Regime Level	33
8.1.3.	Landscape Level.....	34
8.2.	Reparative Innovation	35
9.	Discussion.....	38
9.1.	From National Park to Legal Personhood.....	38
9.2.	Contributions to Transition Theory.....	39
9.3.	Limitations of this Research	40
10.	Conclusion.....	41
	References.....	43
	Annex.....	49

1. Introduction

Initiatives and environmental movements advocating for the *rights of nature* and the conservation of riverine ecosystems through a rights-based approach are picking up globally and are gaining momentum. In the preamble of the Universal Declaration of River Rights (Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, 2018) “the absolute dependence of people on rivers and water-based systems, which support human life by providing us with clean and bountiful water for drinking and sanitation, fertile soil, food sources for billions of people, recreation, cultural uses, and nourishment of the human spirit, as they have done since the beginning of human civilization” has been recognized. However, these initiatives often conflict with private and public interests that are directed at using water resources for economic development, especially, in rural areas. Albania as an EU candidate state faces this dilemma regarding the Vjosa River Basin. The Vjosa River is one of the last European wild rivers with an intact ecosystem that is considered a biodiversity hotspot (Schiemer et al., 2020). The increasing demand for energy and economic development in Albania in the post-Soviet era has exerted political pressure to install hydropower plants also in the Vjosa River Basin (Durim, 2014).

Different Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have submitted legal complaints and used litigation to defend the ecological integrity of the river against the planned hydropower projects and have so far succeeded in preserving the Vjosa’s status (EcoAlbania, 2021). Despite the still ongoing democratization process in Albania and a lack of participation in Albanian river management, the environmental movement that formed around the Vjosa River has managed to generate national and international attention. In March 2023, after ten years of campaigning by **EcoAlbania**, **EuroNatur**, and **Riverwatch**, they have been successful in establishing the first **Wild River National Park**. This milestone decision brings Albania one step closer to preserving the riverine ecosystem of the Vjosa, however, in the past, hydropower development and other infrastructure projects have still been pursued in Protected Areas and National Parks (Vejnović, & Gallop, 2018). The integrity of the Vjosa Delta is still threatened by the construction of the **Vlora Airport**, which is located in the Protected Area of the **Vjosa-Narta Lagoon**. Despite those challenges, political pressure from grassroots movements and national policy attention produces favorable conditions for a transition in Albanian river management and the uptake of innovative niche approaches that could address the challenges of preserving the last European wild river.



Figure 1. Map of the Vjosa River Basin with an overview of the status of hydropower plants.



Figure 2. Aerial picture of the Vjosa River (Nick St Oegger/Patagonia).

After the transition to a market economy, Albania as a post-Soviet country that faced internal unrest from January until August 1997 is still suffering from the socio-economic and environmental consequences of those events (Durim, 2014). Severe environmental degradation and riverine pollution occurred under Soviet rule and poor economic conditions after the systemic transition hampered the country's development (Fagan & Sircair, 2010). Due to its Communist history, Albania's process of democratization is still ongoing, hence, the formation of environmental movements to conserve the environmental status of the Vjosa River has been rather slow (Fagan & Sircair, 2010). However, through the involvement of international actors such as **Patagonia** and the **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)**, a new type of National Park including the whole course of the Vjosa River was established, constituting a milestone in conservation history.

A recent approach that has gained international attention is the *rights of nature* paradigm which attributes rights to natural entities for environmental conservation (Gilissen et al., 2019). Already existing cases such as the Whanganui River in New Zealand and the Vilcabamba River in Ecuador have shown the successful uptake of this new approach. In this context, providing rivers with *legal personhood* gives legal effect to natural entities and enables the defense of their rights in court (Iorns, 2018). *Legal personhood* for rivers implies that "nature has a basic set of legal rights that grants it certain rights, duties, and responsibilities" (O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018, p. 1), which include legal standing, the right to enter and enforce legal contracts, and the right to own property. Applying this concept to natural entities such as rivers has entered the academic debate and especially its effective implementation is subject to contestation (Wilk et al., 2019). The uniqueness of each case where a rights-based approach to river governance has been implemented poses challenges for academic research to identify the degree of transferability to other cases. In the context of the Vjosa River, it would be valuable to explore to what extent the concept of legal personhood could be a feasible approach and how it can address the historical continuities that are leading to environmental harm.

When Albania gained EU candidate state status in 2014, it also adopted more ambitious environmental legislation to comply with EU standards (UNECE, 2018). One of the legal frameworks that also applies to Albania as it shares the Vjosa as a transboundary river basin with Greece, is the **Water Framework Directive (WFD)**. The anthropocentric legal system in Europe views water bodies mainly as a subject of regulation and focuses on the distribution of user rights among different stakeholders (Iorns, 2018). However, the integrity of riverine ecosystems is mostly neglected, which becomes obvious in the latest evaluation of the ecologic status of European water bodies stating that only 40% of European rivers achieved good ecological status (EEA, 2018). Hence, the possibility of Albania shifting from an anthropocentric legal approach to river governance towards one that advocates for a human-nature balance could create a spillover effect to the wider European legal context. This research calls to analyze the prospects of a rights-based approach to river governance in Europe (Gilissen et al., 2019, Wilk et al., 2019) by asking the question "**Which lessons can be drawn from the case study of the Vjosa River about a transition in Albanian river governance?**". This question is divided into five sub-questions to embed the main research question into the Albanian political and legal context.

1. **What is the current political and societal discourse about the Vjosa River in Albania?**
2. **How can the legal personhood of rivers be conceptualized for the Vjosa River?**
3. **Who are the main stakeholders in the Vjosa Basin and what are their main interests?**
4. **To what extent does the declaration of the Wild River National Park qualify as a reparative innovation leading to transformative change in Albanian river management?**
5. **What are the prospects of the Wild River National Park to steer Albanian river management towards a rights-based approach?**

Theoretically, these questions can be investigated by applying the concepts of transition theory, which focuses on the breakthrough of *niche innovations* against the incumbent regime (Geels, 2010). Regime-niche dynamics can help to understand how the pressure on established regimes from bottom-up approaches provides alternative visions to existing practices (Van Der Voorn & Quist, 2018). This thesis will draw on the concept of *reparative innovations* to investigate how innovative legal approaches could also address historical inequalities among involved stakeholders in the Albanian democratization process (Castan Broto et al., 2021). *Reparative innovations* address wrongdoings through the process of reparation that goes beyond correctional justice and is aimed at reconciliation by taking into account historical contexts. Through a process of experimentation innovative methods and practices contribute to the reparative discovery that is fit to repair harm in a sustainable way (Castan Broto et al., 2021). Integrating *reparative environmental justice* into the process of experimentation with *reparative innovations* is directed at coupling environmental sensibility with the reparation of relational harm (Almassi, 2022). Hence, this research aims to contribute conceptually to the field of transition studies by viewing the **Wild River National Park** as a *reparative innovation* challenging the current paradigm of river governance.

2. Contextual Background

In order to answer the sub-question **“What is the current political and societal discourse about the Vjosa River in Albania?”** it is important to consider the development of the socio-political context in Albania. In the following, the Albanian transition towards a democracy and market economy are described and the political discourse on the Vjosa River is introduced.

2.1. The Albanian Democratization Process and its Challenges

Albania’s transition towards a market-based economy and a democratic political system started after the fall of the Soviet Union. As part of the multi-ethnic Soviet satellite state Yugoslavia, Albania was faced with an outbreak of ethnic conflict in the Balkans mainly led by Serbian and Croatian expansionist policy. The dispersed Albanian minorities in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Greece were affected by the nation-state-building conflicts in the Balkans and the competition among ethnic parties. According to Cordell (2006), the process of democratization in the post-Soviet era was coupled with the struggle for ethnic self-determination in the Balkans leading to violence and diplomatic tensions among neighboring countries. Due to the autonomous policies pursued by the totalitarian regime under Enver Hoxha, the leader of the Communist Party of Albania, Albania can be considered an outsider in the region due to its isolation within the Yugoslav regime (Cullhaj, 2016). After the fall of the Communist regime, the fragile state-building process of Albania has been induced based on loose state structures that are reinforced by the large number of Albanian communities living in the neighboring countries (Cullhaj, 2016). Due to its isolation within the Yugoslav state, Albania remained relatively underdeveloped as major technological innovations and modernization initiatives promoted by the Soviet Union were not implemented. Hence, in contrast to its neighbors, a majority of Albania’s population lived and worked in rural areas that focused on agricultural production instead of promoting industrialization and urbanization (Branko, 2022, Cordell, 2006).

The country’s economic underdevelopment reinforced the absence of political opposition and plurality due to the lack of a strong middle class with an academic background that would promote alternative ideas (Cullhaj, 2016). Hence, the political structures under Hoxha’s rule were dominated by the Communist Party and civil society could not develop freely. Since the beginning of the 20th century, political changes have only been introduced in a top-down process, which prevented the development of bottom-up movements based on democratic values (Cullhaj, 2016). Especially the collapse of the economy in 1997, due to pyramid schemes promoted by the government, undermined Albanians’ trust in state institutions as high levels of corruption prevailed. Due to the difficult starting conditions of the transition towards democracy and a free market economy, high social costs such as high levels of unemployment, undemocratic attitudes, and a lack of legitimacy were the result (Cordell, 2006). Even though foreign observers classified the 2009 elections as the first free and fair elections in Albania, their outcome was contested by the opposition and led to protests and social unrest. According to Cullhaj (2016) these contextual factors of the post-Soviet society, economic collapse, absence of democratic

values, and the lack of democratic participation can explain the difficulties to establish a functional democracy in Albania. However, in the first years after the fall of the Communist regime, a period of organization in civil society started, which also led to the establishment of environmental NGOs and social movements.

With the accession to NATO in 2009 and gaining EU candidate status in 2014, structural improvements in Albanian government institutions were introduced to comply with the standards of EU accession and embedded Albania into the Western institutional context (Knezović & Zeneli, 2018). However, the Albanian EU candidate status was rejected three times before the conditions stipulated under the **EU acquis**, which comprises the cumulative body of EU laws, were met. Knezović & Zeneli (2018) identified four indicators of **Europeanization** in the EU political accession process, namely, political performance, institutional capacity, rule of law, and economic performance that determine EU accession. In Albania, high levels of corruption, low economic performance, and a lack of law enforcement have led to a considerably slower process of Europeanization in contrast to other post-Soviet Balkan states such as Serbia (Knezović & Zeneli, 2018). However, the harmonization of regulatory frameworks to EU standards has triggered a wave of institutional reforms. The ratification of international environmental treaties such as the **Aarhus and Bern Conventions** and the integration of EU regulations into the Albanian national legal frameworks has affected the complexity of environmental regulations and enhanced environmental protection standards. The main problem remains with enforcing and monitoring those standards.

For river governance, EU regulations such as the **Water Framework Directive** have been adopted in Albania and created an overarching framework, however, deficits in the implementation remain (Baraj et al., 2017). Citizen participation and their inclusion in the consultation phase of each river management cycle are still lacking. This participation deficit has also become obvious in the Albanian approach to hydropower development (Durim, 2014). The adaptation to EU standards has gradually increased environmental protection and expanded the environmental regulatory framework in Albania that only developed in the post-Soviet period (Fagan & Sircair, 2010). However, challenges remain to make progress towards EU accession and create favorable conditions for the implementation of environmental standards.

One field that shows increasing potential to reconcile economic development and local nature conservation is **Eco-Tourism**. This type of low-impact tourism would help to communities living in the areas of natural heritage sites to generate revenues from the diversity of natural landscapes and create jobs in the tourism sector (Branko, 2022). Especially rural populations could use their local knowledge on the environment to provide insights into traditional Albanian heritage coupled with guided tours with low environmental impact through the surrounding environment. Moreover, local dairy and wine production in the Vjosa Basin are part of the Albanian cultural and natural heritage and could attract regulated amounts of tourism (Branko, 2022). The city of Permet along the Vjosa is composed of old historical sites that are to be found within the natural landscape of Vjosa River. The **Aoos-Vjosa Eco-Museum** has been one initiative to increase the cultural visibility of the area across borders (Sorotou, 2014). It promotes the protection of natural and cultural heritage and expresses it through different themes. Such an approach also enables local communities to tell their local history and express their local identity by also utilizing natural and historical landmarks.

2.2. The Vjosa River as a Source of Political Contestation

Studies by the **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)** have classified the Vjosa River as an ecosystem of European importance that requires the highest protection status (Sovinc, 2021). The Vjosa River is considered a biodiversity hotspot of endangered species such as the European eel, therefore, the river's connectivity is critical to preserving the habitat of these species (Schiemer et al., 2020). Despite the Balkan rivers being global biodiversity hotspots, they are also considered global hotspots for hydropower projects, which shows the clash between conservation and energy interests (EuroNatur, 2015, Wieser, 2019). Albania's main source of energy generation is hydropower, which requires the construction of small and medium-sized dams on the country's main rivers in order to satisfy the growing energy demand. Hydropower plants are harmful to riverine ecosystems as they block

migratory routes for fish species, alter the hydro-morphological conditions in the riverbed, and disconnect rivers from their floodplains (Bloesch & Sieber, 2002). Albania is generating around 99% of its energy from hydropower, which results in increasing ecological pressure on its rivers and is further exacerbated by climate change through reduced precipitation and increasing droughts (Durim, 2014). Hence, the UNECE (2018) recommends the diversification of Albania's energy mix to reduce the dependence on hydropower and reduce the demand for damming Albania's main rivers such as the Vjosa River.

The ratification of the **Aarhus Convention** in 2000, which constitutes access to information, public participation, and judicial access in environmental matters, paved the way for environmental movements in Albania. The convention provides judicial remedies for citizens to appeal decisions by governmental institutions and agencies on environmental matters that require the participation of the public (EcoAlbania, 2021). In the past, negotiations on hydropower projects have been pursued behind closed doors without any public engagement. Moreover, public awareness and information access on decisions on the Vjosa River were considered low until campaigns by environmental NGOs were launched in 2013 (EcoAlbania, 2019). According to a study by EcoAlbania (2019), it has been shown that the Vjosa River received the highest news coverage on environmental issues reported in Albanian history leading to the formation of an active environmental movement. Despite the high news coverage, the information provided lacked scientific fact checks, comprehensible explanations for citizens to understand the environmental impacts and an unbiased perspective (EcoAlbania, 2019). Hence, citizens' awareness of environmental issues on the Vjosa River still remained low domestically but peaked after successful lawsuits against the construction of hydropower plants on the Vjosa River and its tributaries. The involvement of the international media created pressure on the Albanian government when Leonardo DiCaprio, who is known for his environmental activism, shared the **"Save the Blue Heart"** campaign by RiverWatch and EuroNatur on his social media channels. Moreover, the first lawsuit on environmental issues against the biggest hydropower plants planned on the Vjosa in **Pocem** and **Kalivac** marked a historical milestone for environmental litigation in Albania and created a precedent (EJAtlas, 2023).

When the Albanian government announced the approval of several hydropower plants in Kalivac and Pocem, litigation was supported by an alliance of local communities, environmental NGOs such as RiverWatch, EuroNatur, and EcoAlbania and scientific experts from Albania, Germany, and Austria. Within the framework of the **Bern Convention**, which covers the protection of flora and fauna, the decision of the Albanian government was appealed in court due to the detrimental environmental impact that would be caused by the hydropower projects downstream (EcoAlbania, 2021). The **Administrative Court in Tirana** found the Turkish construction company commissioned with the building of the hydropower dam in Pocem in violation of considering the adverse environmental effects on flora and fauna. Moreover, corruption regarding **Environmental Impact Assessments** (EIA) and the absence of public hearings violated national law and the provisions of the Bern and Aarhus Conventions (Williams & Dupuy, 2017). Hence, national and international legal instruments have been employed by environmental NGOs to protect the Vjosa River from the threat of uncontrolled hydropower development.

Since 2014, the **"Save the Blue Heart" Campaign** by RiverWatch and EuroNatur opposes the uncontrolled hydropower development in the Balkans and advocates for the conservation of free-flowing rivers such as the Vjosa River (RiverWatch, 2023). The campaign has mobilized scientific experts to conduct research on the Vjosa River in order to provide scientific evidence on the potential effect of hydropower development on the river and to justify the highest protection status as outlined by the IUCN. The campaign **"Vjosa National Park NOW"** has advocated to establish a **Wild River National Park** including the whole course of the Vjosa River in order to ensure the integrity of the riverine ecosystem (EuroNatur, 2015). It gained international attention, which cumulated in the announcement of the National Park in March 2023 by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama. However, in the last decades, over 200 construction projects have been approved in Albania of which some are located in Protected Areas. This has shown that the establishment of Protected Areas and National Parks has not prevented the approval of hydropower projects (Vejnović and Gallop, 2018). International funding by financial institutions reinforced the trend of economic development through hydropower energy due to its status as renewable energy source. The **European Bank for Reconstruction and Development** (EBRD)

provided funding for hydropower development in Protected Areas across the Balkans. A study by Vejnović and Gallop (2018) identified 29 existing or planned hydropower plants supported by the bank in Protected Areas or recognized areas of high biodiversity value. Even though so far, the threat of hydropower dams on the Vjosa River could be avoided through legal action taken by NGOs, the Albanian government is still pursuing harmful construction projects in the Vjosa Basin such as the **Vlora Airport** located in the Protected Area of the **Vjosa-Narta Lagoon** (EcoAlbania, 2021).

Local communities are impacted by hydropower projects due to the alteration of the river flow and potential flooding caused by the construction of reservoirs, hence, including them through a participatory approach to river governance is important to prevent social inequalities (Meulenbroek et al., 2021). Citizens have not been consulted prior to the approval of hydropower projects and legally mandatory **Environmental Impact Assessments** are often missing (Williams & Dupuy, 2017). However, the Vjosa River has increasingly become a subject of political contestation as local communities organized themselves together with environmental NGOs such as EcoAlbania to become an active part in the political decisions on the river (EcoAlbania, 2021). The lasting emotional impact the river has on the communities living along its shores and enjoying the ecosystem services provided by its rich ecosystem evoked a strong environmental movement in Albania and beyond. Recreational activities and people's daily lives related to agriculture, fishing, and ecotourism are threatened by the planned hydropower projects. Local communities also attach personal value to childhood memories related to the Vjosa that add an emotional dimension to the river (Patagonia, 2021). Next to its cultural role in local communities, the Vjosa River is also a source of participatory democratization in Albania.

3. Conceptualizing River Rights

This section presents an overview of the academic debate on the rights of nature paradigm and existing cases of rivers being conferred legal personhood in order to answer the sub-question **“How can the legal personhood of rivers be conceptualized for the Vjosa River?”**.

3.1. A Rights-Based Approach to River Management

In Europe, rivers have been subjected to extensive management by humans concerning the regulation of their flow, the reconstruction of their floodplains, and the construction of hydropower dams impacting their ecosystem (Wilke et al., 2019). Through EU and national regulations, user rights, pollution permits, and their navigation have been regulated throughout history, which mostly focused on human objectives instead of rivers' ecological status (Gilissen et al., 2019). Within the framework of the **Water Framework Directive**, the ecological status of European water bodies is assessed in seven-year cycles and sets standards for the restoration of rivers. This mainly technical approach neglects the emotional relationships between communities and rivers and the intrinsic value of their ecosystems. As the main goal of the Water Framework Directive is to find a sustainable balance between the use of rivers and the conservation of their ecosystems, rivers are mostly viewed as human property without acknowledging humankind's dependence on their ecosystem services (Borrás, 2016). This anthropocentric view led to severe ecological degradation and overexploitation of riverine ecosystems in the past, hence, a more balanced human-nature legal approach is on the rise in countries such as the US, Colombia, Ecuador, and New Zealand (Eckstein et al., 2019). The global pace of initiatives related to the *rights of nature* is picking up, which was shown by research conducted by Putzer et al. (2022), who created a quantitative overview of existing initiatives that have been launched. They found a total of 409 initiatives between 2006 and 2021 with more than 155 regulations only passed in the US. 66.5 percent of the initiatives recognized nature bearing rights by either defining a geographical scope or not, followed by 17.8 percent of initiatives relating to aquatic ecosystems (Putzner et al., 2022). Hence, this study shows the spill over of the rights of nature approach around the globe and the growing application to riverine ecosystems.

The rights of nature approach stems from the work of Christopher Stone (1972), who forwards the idea that humans need “to step in on behalf of the river or another body of nature to sue for its protection” (Iorns, 2018, p. 3). This argument rests on humanity's duty of care for the environment which is also connected to the inherent human right to a healthy environment. Attributing legal rights to natural entities

is often coupled with the **reclamation of indigenous rights** and claims for the recognition of indigenous property (Eckstein et al., 2019). Ecuador was the first country to enshrine rights of nature in its Constitution in 2008. The case of the **Vilcabamba River** provided the foundation for river rights and was extended further by litigation (Clark et al., 2019). Nature as a collective entity was recognized to possess standing in court that can be invoked by individuals on its behalf. Hence, damages to a riverine ecosystem can be claimed by individuals as a form of protective action aimed at preventing further damage (Clark et al., 2019). Due to its constitutional status, litigation on behalf of natural entities needs to weigh individual rights against other community interests that impair the right to a healthy ecosystem for a larger collective. Despite the impactful nature of this new concept, the narrative surrounding this case was less focused on the river itself but more on finding a strategic balance between the rights of nature and human interests (Clark et al., 2019).

Another milestone decision was achieved in 2017 when the Parliament of New Zealand decided to confer legal personhood on the **Whanganui River** recognizing it as an “indivisible and living whole, comprising the Whanganui River from the mountains to the sea, [and] incorporating all its physical and metaphysical elements” (Te Awa Tupua Act, 2017). The Whanganui Act acknowledges the spiritual and cultural importance of the river for the Maori communities and realizes their claims as ancestral guardians of the river in a post-colonial context. Conferring *legal personhood* on the Whanganui River embeds Maori values and ontologies into New Zealand’s common law system of property rights and first-serves-first water permits (Clark et al., 2019). The Western and Maori ontologies of river governance are represented by the shared guardianship of the Whanganui River by the Crown and Maori iwi. A Strategy Group representing different interest groups ensures the effective monitoring of the rights of the river (O’Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2017). Hence, this approach addresses **reparative justice** by acknowledging the river as a spiritual and living entity, which was subject to contested claims of sovereignty by Maori iwi and the Crown (O’Donnell & MacPherson, 2018). However, no ownership of the river by Maori iwi was recognized by the Crown showing the political compromise that avoids the redistribution of user rights and highlights the conflict between the concepts of **indigenous ancestral relationships** and **Western property rights** (O’Donnell & MacPherson, 2018).

In Colombia, the traditional jurisprudence over the last decades cumulated in an *Ecological Constitution* that enshrines a healthy environment as a collective good. Hence, riverine preservation by conferring legal personhood onto the **Atrato River** in 2017 is part of the *biocultural rights* embedded within the *Ecological Constitution* of Colombia. According to Clark et al. (2019) *biocultural rights* are defined as coupling “peoplehood” and “ecosystems” through the notion of community, which recognizes especially the longstanding connection between indigenous communities and the environment. In the case of the Atrato River, the Colombian Constitutional Court attributed legal standing to Nature as a form of legitimate representation and recognized its importance for the survival of present and future generations (Clark et al., 2019). Due to the high levels of pollution of the Atrato River, the Colombian Constitutional Court granted it the rights of protection, conservation, regeneration, and care (Fuchs, 2023). Similar to the case in Ecuador, the legal status of the Atrato River was a strategic recognition of the rights of nature as a whole and making it a subject of law.

The **Mar Menor** in Spain is one of the first cases in Europe granting a water body legal status. The decision to create rights for the unique saltwater lagoon was based on a *Popular Legislative Initiative* gathering 600,000 votes that urged the Spanish Parliament to adopt legislation on the protection of the Mar Menor. The existing environmental framework was not sufficient to prevent the ecological collapse of the lagoon in 2016 and 2019 caused by eutrophication, hence, a rights-based approach was sought by a citizens’ initiative (Fuchs, 2023). Three committees were established to exercise the *guardianship* of the lagoon consisting of civil society representatives, scientists, and auditors. In contrast to the cases presented above, no indigenous communities were involved in the legislative proposal, which shows that mainly the integrity of the ecosystem and the environmental concern of citizens were at the heart of Mar Menor’s legal status (Fuchs, 2023). The decision was challenged by agricultural interest groups claiming the lack of a legal basis, as there are no rights of nature enshrined in the Spanish Constitution. Despite the weak constitutional base, the **democratic legitimacy** in the Mar Menor case is enhanced through the approval by the Spanish Parliament as the representative organ of the state (Fuchs, 2023).

The cases in Colombia, Ecuador and New Zealand show the connection between the rights of nature and politics surrounding *reparative justice* in a post-colonial context. Hence, in these cases the claims by indigenous communities related to their *guardianship* of rivers were recognized and coupled with their traditional values on nature protection. The Ecuadorian and Colombian cases enacted legal rights of rivers through judicial means while the Whanganui River and the Mar Menor were conferred *legal personhood* by the legislative branch. The choice of legislative, executive or judicial means has implications for the legitimacy of the decision but also comes with different barriers to successful adoption (Putzer et al., 2022). Mar Menor was the first European case in which a water body gained legal personhood, hence, it created a precedent within the anthropocentric European legal system. It is also an outlier case as there was no indigenous involvement, however, it can be considered to promote the empowerment of local communities by recognizing their cultural and emotional connection to the water body (Fuchs, 2023).

The approach raises questions about the effectiveness of environmental law and the legitimacy of the current legal system. According to O'Donnell and MacPherson (2018), "creating a 'voice' for the river, and enabling the river to compete with other users, legal rights for rivers can challenge the legitimacy of laws and regulations that protect the river" (p. 4), which creates the potential for a transition in river management. The *output legitimacy* of environmental law to deliver the desired environmental outcomes has been undermined by the fast deterioration of riverine ecosystems in the cases mentioned above. Moreover, a shift away from state authority toward *community management* centered around ecosystem integrity would provide improved environmental protection (Clark et al., 2019). Enhancing collaborative management of riverine ecosystems would increase *input legitimacy* "by providing for transparent, accountable decision-making, and equal access for all participants" (O'Donnell & MacPherson, 2018, p.11). The reparative justice dimension of the rights of nature paradigm can also be applied to post-Soviet countries as the lack of **participatory democracy** and **corruption** under Soviet rule created systemic inequalities among relevant stakeholders. Therefore, connecting a rights-based approach to rivers with *reparative environmental justice* in Albanian river management is one way to restore a human-nature balance and revert historical inequalities.

3.2. Defining Legal Personhood for a River

The legal personhood of rivers "creates a new, identifiable, legal entity (the legal person), which includes all the necessary legal rights (standing, contract, and property) for granting the nonhuman entity its own personality" (O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018, p. 2). It confers *legal standing* to entities in a court of law when the rights of the given entity are affected. It attributes mostly three rights to an entity, namely entering and enforcing contracts, the right to own and deal with property, and the right to sue (Eckstein et al., 2019). Based on the legal traditions of a country, the conferral of rights to rivers can vary in their scope and can use different legal bases to substantiate those rights. In existing cases, legal personhood was conferred to rivers through **legislation**, as in the case of the Whanganui River in New Zealand and Mar Menor in Spain, through *constitutional rights of nature* in Ecuador and Bolivia, and through **court rulings** in Colombia on the Atrato River (Wilk et al., 2019).

In the **Universal Declaration of River Rights**, six main rights were forwarded including the rights to flow, to perform essential functions within its ecosystem, to be free from pollution, to feed and be fed by sustainable aquifers, the right to native biodiversity, to regeneration and restoration, and the right to lateral and longitudinal connectivity (Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, 2018). Moreover, this declaration also advocates for the decommissioning of all dams that do not serve compelling social and ecological purposes to move towards a dam-free world. A *legal guardian* has to be appointed to represent the river and its rights in court. According to Eckstein et al. (2019), the main reasons to grant rivers legal personhood relate to the self-determination of indigenous communities and their values, to create equality between humans and nature in a legal setting, and to ensure that the river's interests are included in policy debates.

The approaches taken in cases in New Zealand, Spain, Ecuador, and Colombia show fundamental differences in terms of the scope of rights, the legal base used, the stakeholders affected, and the application in practice. Hence, clarity on this practice is still lacking on a universal scale but needs to be considered case-by-case. In the Vjosa case, there are different regulations that have to be considered: the

Constitution of Albania, national environmental legislation, EU law, and international treaties. Moreover, it was argued that the main added value of this legal personhood approach is the exercise of political participation in policy debates affecting the interests of the river (Wilke et al., 2019). Hence, through its guardians, the *voice of the river* is recognized in the policy process.

The approach raised questions about the restriction of property rights related to rivers as the conferral of legal personhood to protect riverine ecosystems affects water use, economic activity, and pollution permits (Grinlington & Taylor, 2011). In the case of the Whanganui River, *ownership of the riverbed* was transferred back to the river itself and the exercise of these property rights to the legal guardians to be used in the best interest of the river. In the Mar Menor case, agricultural producers challenged the constitutionality of legal personhood as they claim it disproportionately restricts their property rights and farmers' freedom of occupation (Fuchs, 2023). Granting rivers and water bodies legal personhood surely causes trade-offs with human interests, however, the ineffectiveness of existing environmental regulations to protect their ecosystem's integrity requires the weighing of individual freedoms against the collective good of a healthy environment.

4. Conceptual Framework

4.1. Research Aim

This research aims to contribute to the conceptual debate on a rights-based approach to river governance in Albania while also exploring the possibility to induce transformative change through innovative legal approaches. Hence, it draws on the academic debate on conferring legal personhood on rivers to evaluate whether such an approach would be feasible in Albania. The historical context in Albania plays an important role in the dynamics among relevant stakeholders and the existing power inequalities among them. For this purpose, the concept of *reparative innovations* is used to highlight the potential for a paradigm shift in Albanian river governance through an innovative legal approach (Castan Broto et al., 2021). As the Vjosa River was declared the first **Wild River National Park**, this innovative legal approach is scrutinized in order to determine whether it qualifies as a *reparative innovation* that is able to steer Albanian river management towards legal personhood. Providing the Vjosa River with legal personhood is viewed as a means to facilitate transformative change in Albanian river governance while addressing structural inequalities and power imbalances between stakeholders.

This research also aims to contribute to the field of transition theory by drawing from its established concepts while adding *reparative innovations* as an emerging concept to apply to the Vjosa case. The *reparative justice* dimension that comes with this concept relates to the theoretical branch of just transitions but also accounts for human-nature relationships. Exploring the transformative potential of this niche practice is relevant for studying emerging transitions in river governance within a post-Soviet context. The post-Soviet context in Albania requires a *reparative environmental justice* approach that addresses the current human-nature imbalance and socio-political power inequalities simultaneously.

4.2. Theoretical Framework

This research aims to apply the already existing theoretical framework by Van der Voorn and Quist (2018) that builds on the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) by Geels (2011) and is extended by the concept of *reparative innovations* (Castan Broto et al., 2021). Hence, a theory testing approach is employed by applying well-developed and innovative frameworks to the case of the Vjosa River. Even though transition theory has already been used to study transitions in European river management (Brugge & Rotmanns, 2006), the implications of conferring *legal personhood* to rivers have not been investigated from a transition perspective yet. It also has not been applied to study legal innovations such as the Wild River National Park. Hence, this new approach is conceptualized as a niche innovation that provides an alternative to the anthropocentric River Basin Management approach dominant in the EU. Moreover, the role of innovative legal approaches remains underdeveloped in transitions theory as changes in the regulatory framework can either drive or inhibit transitions (Soininen et al., 2021). The *reparative environmental justice* implications of such a transition are studied by applying the concept of *reparative innovations* coined by Castan Broto et al. (2021). Figure three provides an overview of the research strategy and the theoretical framework.

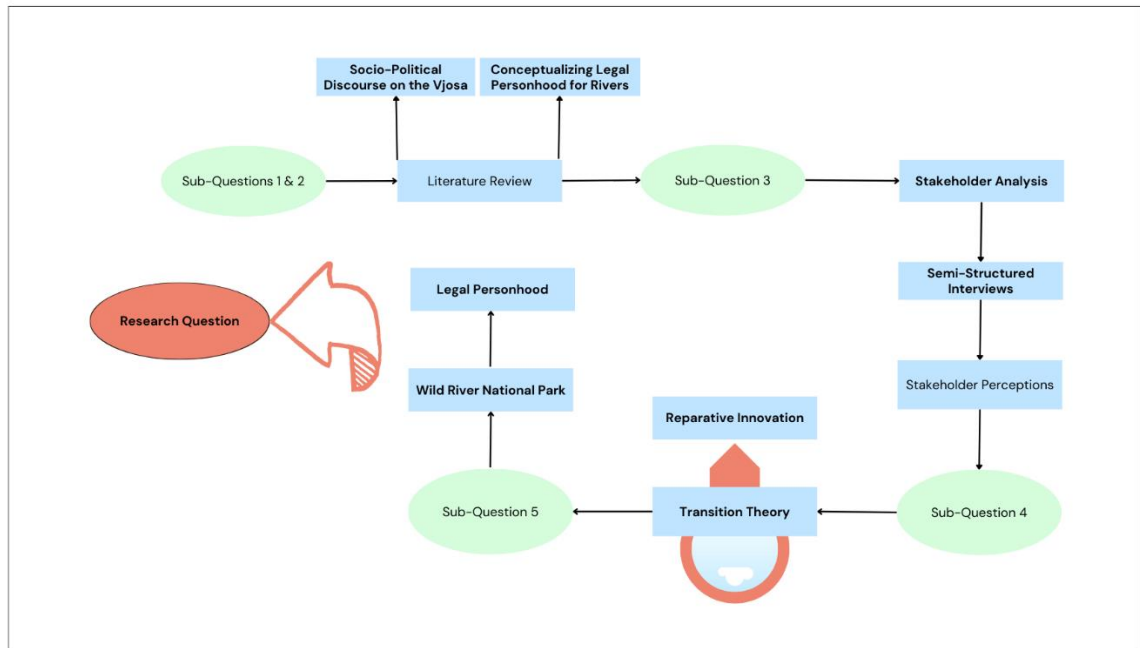


Figure 3. Overview of the research strategy.

4.3. Transition Theory

Transition theory is focused on the transitions of complex *socio-technical systems* (STS) towards more sustainable configurations. Some key assumptions about the transition of these systems relate to the difficulty to steer the transition process as dynamics among different system levels create unexpected outcomes. STSs are constituted by three main levels: *landscape*, *regimes*, and *niches*. Geels's (2011) *Multi-Level Perspective* is one prominent approach that accounts for the complex dynamics among the different levels and lock-in mechanisms that stabilize incumbent regimes and unsustainable practices. The *socio-technical regime* "refers to the semi-coherent set of rules that orient and coordinate the activities of the social groups that reproduce the various elements of socio-technical systems" (Geels, 2011, p. 27). These rules shape the behavior of actors but are also enacted and modified by them, which results in complex interactions among regime and niche actors. Niches are innovative protected spaces that explore alternative practices and technologies diverging from the dominant approaches of the regime (Geels, 2011). Hence, transformative change is triggered by *niche innovations* that lead to the reconfiguration of existing regimes. Regime-niche dynamics are embedded in the *socio-technical landscape* that comprises external factors such as demographics, political conditions, worldviews, and events that can lead to changes on the regime level.

The main patterns of transitions include three steps, namely "(a) niche-innovations build up internal momentum, (b) changes at the landscape level create pressure on the regime, and (c) destabilization of the regime creates windows of opportunity for niche innovations" (Geels, 2011, p. 29). *Outside actors* are important to steer the beginning of the transition process. Fischer and Newig (2016) provide a distinction of three different types of groups that can benefit the long-term success of the transition. Those groups are "firms (because they can mobilize knowledge and financial and managerial resources to develop such alternative innovations); scientists (because they can introduce new designs, criteria, approaches and concepts); and societal pressure groups (because they have the potential to mobilize insiders in the regime)" (Fischer & Newig, 2016, p. 475). This distinction is used in the analysis to showcase the influence these outside actors have on the transition in Albanian river management.

Van der Voorn & Quist (2018) highlight that transitions in *socio-ecological systems* are similarly focused on regime change and only differ by taking into account the interconnectedness of natural and human systems. *Socio-ecological systems* (SES) are coined by Folke et al. (2004) and refer to the interaction of human systems and ecosystems, which can lead to a transition towards a resilient system that can adapt to new conditions and cope with disturbances. As the Vjosa Basin qualifies as a complex SES that is shaped through human-nature interaction the transition of the current management regime can be analyzed through this theoretical lens.

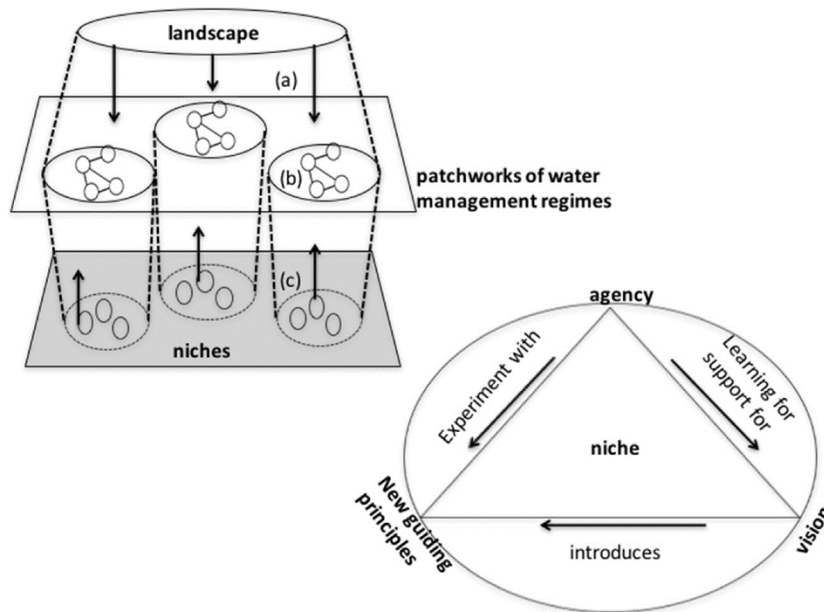


Figure 4. Theoretical approach by Van der Voorn and Quist (2018) based on Geels (2011) MLP shows the interaction between agency and visions and the configuration of water management regimes.

Van der Voorn & Quist (2018) introduce the concepts of *visions* and *agency* and their role in the transition of SESs. Rotmanns et al. (2001) define *visions* as “a framework for formulating short-term objectives and evaluating existing policy (. . .) these visions must be appealing and imaginative and be supported by a broad range of actors” (p. 23). *Visions* are based on alternative worldviews that are not shared by large groups in society and have commonalities such as an image of the future, an ideal, or a desire for change (Van der Voorn & Quist, 2018). Actors and their networks are key to supporting niches and alternative *visions* of the future from their emergence to their breakthrough. Hence, *agency* relates to the capacity of actors to exert pressure on the regime and seize *windows of opportunity* for transformative change (Van der Voorn & Quist, 2018). Niches, then, provide spaces for emerging *visions* to develop and when taken up by a network of actors supporting them, their *agency* can lead to their breakthrough. The emerging *visions* and *agency* of actors supporting their breakthrough can be analyzed within the stakeholder analysis and the semi-structured interviews.

4.4. Transitions through Reparative Innovations

The concept of *reparative innovations* was applied to urban climate adaptation measures (Castan Broto, 2021) by merging a reparative justice dimension with the concept of niche innovations from transition theory. A reparative justice dimension is relevant in the Albanian post-Soviet context of democratization in order to repair socio-political inequalities related to managing Albania’s main rivers. Castan Broto et al. (2021) stress the importance of historical contexts in addressing power imbalances and structural inequalities. These often arise in the aftermath of post-Soviet transitions and ongoing democratization processes, hence, these aspects need to be considered when identifying stakeholders and their position on the Vjosa River. Moreover, current human-nature relationships often result in environmental harm that needs reparation in order to create conditions that prevent environmental wrongdoings and their effect on marginalized groups from occurring. Hence, “practical experiences in reparative justice cast it as a process in-the-making that requires a certain degree of experimentation in discovering what constitutes justice” (Castan Broto et al., 2021, p. 208).

The concept is derived from *disruptive innovations* that provide alternatives to dominant practices and have the potential to disrupt the existing regime and facilitate its reconfiguration. Their disruptive potential often invokes resistance by incumbent actors that feel threatened by their transformative power and aim to either incorporate these innovative practices themselves or try to prevent their breakthrough (Geels, 2011). However, in contrast to *disruptive innovations*, which emerge within the regime, *reparative innovations* are the product of socio-historical continuities that are underpinned by *narratives* to reinforce the dominance of the existing regime (Castan Broto et al., 2021). Therefore, establishing new narratives such as recognizing the rights of nature supports the diffusion of *reparative innovations* that target the sources of unsustainability arising from historical contexts. Stakeholder engagement is crucial for the successful uptake of *reparative innovations* as they play an important role in the reconciliation process between victims and perpetrators of environmental injustice (Figueroa et al., 2010).

4.5. Reparative Environmental Justice

Reparative environmental justice is considered the outcome of a transition induced by reparative innovations that experiment with new approaches and address historical continuities. Hence, *reparative innovations* aim to repair wrongdoings of the past through experimentation with *narratives* of what constitutes the reconfiguration of justice (Castan Broto et al., 2021). Reparative justice is fundamentally different from corrective justice, which relies mostly on the compensation of victims by perpetrators. Instead, reparative justice aims to repair relational harm (Almassi, 2022). The relational dimension refers to the re-establishment of trust, common values, and responsibility (Walker, 2015). *Reparative environmental justice* integrates environmental sensibility by recognizing the interconnectedness of human and ecological relationships and the disruptive effect environmental harm can have on humans.

Figueroa et al. (2010) highlight that *participation* is one of the main drivers of reparative justice outcomes. Hence, *reparative environmental justice* outcomes can be linked to the process of democratization in Albania as participation in Albanian river governance is limited yet. As reparative justice evokes government responsibility, recognizing the state's role in environmental wrongdoings and their reparation is important to create favorable conditions that prevent the occurrence of socio-ecological harm (Castan Broto et al., 2022). The main aim of implementing *reparative environmental justice* for the Vjosa River is to restore a human-nature balance through a new legal approach to Albanian river governance that is taking into account historical continuities. Table one provides an overview of the concepts employed and explains their operationalization for the analytical purposes of this research.

Table 1. Synthesis of concepts and their operationalization for analytical purposes.

Concept	Description	Operationalization
Visions (Van der Voorn & Quist, 2018)	Visions provide alternatives for dominant practices and worldviews. They emerge from niches and are supported by small fractions of society with a different worldview.	Broad visions for Albanian river management but also international vision for nature conservation or local vision on the Basin level are investigated. Human-nature balance as an underlying vision indicates favorable attitude towards the practice of conferring legal personhood on the Vjosa River. Human-nature balance can be traced in documents and interviews with stakeholders.
Agency (Van der Voorn & Quist, 2018)	Agency is the capacity of actors to influence decision-making processes in water management regimes. Agency in form of support for emergent visions and niche innovations can lead to their breakthrough.	The level of agency relates to the influence a certain stakeholder has on the decision-making process and outcome on the Vjosa River. Can be complemented by document analysis of policy documents or

		reports by stakeholders. Other forms of agency include financial support, decision-making power, environmental activism, and community involvement in decisions on the Vjosa River.
Reparative Innovation (Castan Broto et al., 2021)	A niche innovation that addresses historical continuities and aims to repair relational harm. Through a process of experimentation reconfigures conception of justice in order to rebuild trust, responsibility and common values. In this case it is directed at restoring human-nature relationships by inducing transformative change in Albanian river governance.	Concept of the Vjosa Wild River National Park critically discussed from a reparative innovation perspective. Application of the concept in practice and implications need to fulfil certain criteria, namely, address historical continuities, socio-economic inequalities, and power dynamics among stakeholders. Experimental process to reconfigure justice by taking into account relationships among stakeholders and human-nature relationships needs to be participatory.
Reparative Environmental Justice	The outcome of the transition induced by reparative innovations. Reparative justice coupled with environmental sensibility that can be tailored per case in order to take into account local context. Reparation of environmental and social harm by taking into account complex interactions among human systems and ecosystems.	Critical discussion of how the Vjosa Wild River National Park as reparative innovation can steer the river governance regime in Albania towards a reparative environmental justice outcome. Determine outcome for the Albanian context of river governance in the Vjosa case. Distinguish outcomes for the European and national levels in order to account for different dynamics and different stakeholders.

5. Methodology

5.1. Methods

Case Study Design

Gerring (2004) defines a case study as an in-depth study of a single unit with the purpose to generate lessons from one or more cases about a certain phenomenon. This study uses an exploratory case study design in order to analyze the case of the Vjosa River in-depth and to obtain a general picture of this specific case. The Vjosa case was selected due to its significance as the last European wild river and the unique governance challenges that come with the post-Soviet Albanian context. Albania's post-Soviet history and its dependence on hydropower are contextual factors that are representative of many Balkan states and enable the inference of generalizable lessons for river governance in the Balkans (Fagan & Sircair, 2010). The exploratory nature of this research and the uniqueness of the Vjosa case allow for a new conceptualization of river governance through the theoretical lens of transition theory. The use of mixed qualitative methods such as interviews and desk research is suitable for uncovering the underlying perceptions of stakeholders embedded in the context of this case (Gillham, 2000). Gerring (2004) stresses that case studies are informative for examining correlational and proximate causal relationships. Hence,

the purpose of this study is to identify causality for a transition in Albanian river governance through innovative legal approaches.

For a case study, the context embeds the units of analysis (Widner et al., 2022). Contextual factors on the one hand distinguish comparable cases but on the other hand, can lead to different outcomes of similar processes. This case study is comprised of three units of analysis, which are the European, National and Basin levels, and structure the analysis according to these levels. Those units of analysis are comparable within the context, time frame, and theoretical approach applied to this case study. By using semi-structured interviews and desk research as complementary methods of data collection, the validity of this case study design is enhanced through the triangulation of data (Gillham, 2000). The Albanian EU accession process induces changes on the national level as the implementation of the EU acquis is extending the Albanian regulatory framework and reinforces reforms in Albanian river management. The political and socio-economic developments at the European level qualify as overarching landscape embedding the developments on the Basin and National levels. Figure 4 visualizes the case study design and its units of analysis.

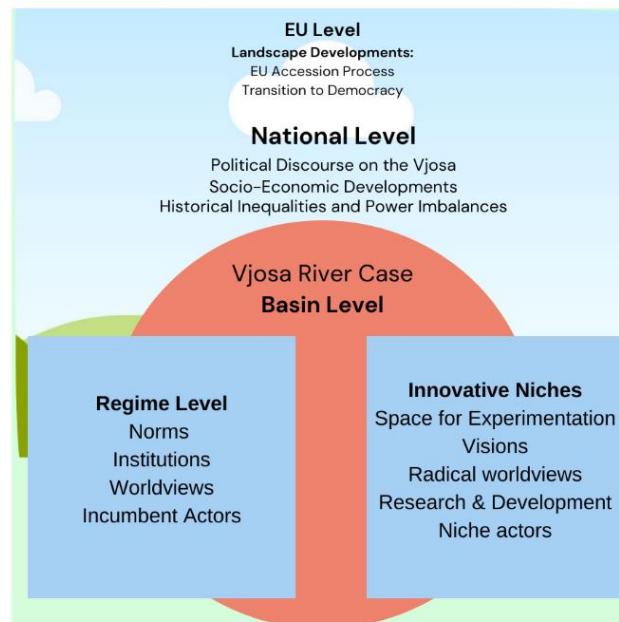


Figure 5. Case study design and units of analysis.

Stakeholder Analysis

The Water Framework Directive explicitly recommends stakeholder analysis as a method that supports River Basin Management, hence, Comino et al. (2016) stress the importance of stakeholder analysis to “understanding a system by identifying the key actors and assessing their respective interest in that system” (p. 184). Several definitions of stakeholders exist (Freeman, 2010, Mitchell et al., 1997), however, this research relies on the inclusive definition by Starik (1995), who refers to human and non-human entities having a stake in decision-making outcomes because they are directly affected by them. Stakeholders can be grouped into active and passive stakeholders depending on their ability to influence the decision-making process or whether they are affected by the decisions taken (Comino et al., 2016). Moreover, based on the framework by Van der Voorn and Quist (2018) stakeholders can be distinguished into niche and regime actors and their visions and agency can be derived from policy documents, grey literature, and semi-structured interviews.

The process of identifying relevant stakeholders is iterative and draws from a literature review to identify the first set of stakeholders (Blázquez et al., 2021). A coupled normative and descriptive approach to stakeholder analysis is taken by identifying which stakeholders should be included in river governance based on the regulatory framework in place and who is involved based on a literature study (Mitchell et al., 1997). This initial set is then complemented by semi-structured interviews that provide in-depth and subjective perceptions by key stakeholders on the Vjosa case. This research employs analytical categorization in order to classify stakeholders, which according to Reed et al. (2009) qualifies as a top-down approach led by the observations of the researcher. Reed et al. (2008) stress that “the long-term success of participatory processes may depend on institutionally embedding stakeholder participation” (p. 2426), therefore, their integration in the decision-making process is important to establish in the Vjosa case. This stakeholder analysis will entail a desk research-based review of relevant documents and an analytical categorization to present a comprehensive overview of stakeholders’ position on the Vjosa River complemented by their vision and agency. The findings from the semi-structured interviews are used to possibly redefine some categorizations within the process to account for stakeholders’ perceptions. Table two below provides an overview of what a comprehensive overview entails.

Table 2. Comprehensive overview of the analytical categorization of stakeholders based on the framework used by Reed et al. (2009) and Van der Voorn and Quist (2018).

Analytical criteria	Categorization	Categorization	Vision	Agency
Stakeholder	Regime/Niche/Landscape actor	European, National, Basin or other level	Description	Description

5.2. Methods of Data Collection

Desk-Research

This research uses secondary data next to primary data from the semi-structured interviews in order to draw from existing research and material available on the Vjosa River. From online sources such as scientific reports, NGO reports, grey literature, news articles, and visual material such as documentaries, secondary data can be extracted. Reviewing established studies enhances the knowledge about the Vjosa case and generates a broad understanding of the topic from different fields. A snowballing technique is used to identify relevant scientific articles by scholars in the fields of transition studies, river governance, natural resource management, legal studies, sociology, and ecology. This research uses a literature review to establish the contextual conditions of the Vjosa case and to identify the involved stakeholders. Moreover, it is used to conceptualize the legal personhood of rivers by reviewing the literature on existing cases and to establish the conceptual background.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews provide in-depth insights into the perception of stakeholders in the Vjosa case. They serve the purpose to inform the stakeholder analysis and provide clarity on how the different stakeholders perceive the developments around the National Park declaration of the Vjosa River. The semi-structured nature of interviews provides room for elaboration to dive deeper into aspects that stakeholders highlight as particularly important or to encourage them to elaborate on their emotional relationship with the Vjosa River (Knott et al., 2022). By following a pre-defined set of interview questions per stakeholder the reliability of the findings is enhanced but does not restrict the possibility to use follow-up questions during the interview (Gillham, 2000). Hence, this practice allows for comparability of answers among stakeholders but also shows where they differentiate based on which topics they emphasize over others. The interview guides can be found in the Annex. As interviewing is considered a suitable approach to use for exploratory research it also draws on the social networks of actors to generate a sample of participants (Bryman et al., 2021). For this research, a snowballing technique is used where first networking activities with EcoAlbania as one of the main stakeholders lead to identifying additional stakeholders that are

relevant to contact. Hence, this research draws on EcoAlbania’s network, which is rooted within the national context but has also established international contacts with other NGOs and environmental collectives such as EuroNatur. Even though fieldwork would be highly valuable for this research to interview people in their local context, online interviews are the most suitable format for interviewing stakeholders located in Albania and other European countries such as Germany and Austria.

Besides NGO involvement, local stakeholders such as representatives from municipalities in which hydropower projects were successfully prevented provide valuable insights into the local environmental networks and the local political discourse. Interviewing representatives from hydropower companies would enrich this research by presenting opposing views from the environmental movement in Albania, however, their participation is unlikely due to contractual interests. A sample of respondents can be established based on the findings of the stakeholder analysis, which in turn is informed by the interview findings. Hence, data triangulation among results from the literature review and the interviews enhances internal validity while the replicable design of this research can be applied to other post-Soviet cases accounting for external validity. The limitations of this approach concern the time-consuming nature of interviews and the possible language barrier with the Albanian stakeholders. The transcripts of the conducted interviews are analyzed based on the concepts of visions and agency by Van der Voorn and Quist (2018) that are employed to structure the perception of stakeholders related to the potential for transformative change through the Vjosa Wild River National Park.

Table 3. Preliminary overview of a description of interviewees and their position on the Vjosa.

Respondent	Organization	Function	Position on the Vjosa
EcoAlbania Representatives	Environmental NGO	Generate support for creating a Vjosa National Park and empowering local communities against hydropower projects along the Vjosa River.	Conservation of the ecosystem by employing litigation and raising public awareness. Campaign for establishing a National Park to ensure the protection of the Vjosa River and the integrity of its ecosystem.
Local Community Representatives	Local Environmental Movements	Aim to prevent the construction of hydropower plants and increase participation in river management in Albania.	Preservation of local communities’ daily lives and their relationship with the river. Emotional relationship with the river evoked environmental movement.
Municipal Government Representatives	Local Administration	Coordinate local river management of the Vjosa River and implement national policies. Regional development needs to be weighed with the conservation of the Vjosa River.	Aim to enhance local livelihoods and coordinate sectoral policies concerning the Vjosa River.
Ministry of Tourism and Environment Civil Servants	Government Department	Enhance ecological conditions in Albania and provide suitable	Conserve the status of the Vjosa River through environmental policies.

		policies for river management.	
Hydropower Company Representatives	International and National Private Sectors	Construction of hydropower plants and production of electricity for the national and international markets.	Commercialization of the Vjosa River for electricity production.
Scientific Experts	Research Institutes	Inform the decisions on the Vjosa River by conducting Environmental Impact Assessments and gathering hydrological data.	Advocate for the conservation of the Vjosa River by providing a scientific basis and by showing the harmful impact of hydropower on rivers in the Balkans.

6. Results

6.1. Stakeholder Analysis

In order to answer the third sub-question “**Who are the main stakeholders in the Vjosa Basin and what are their main interests?**” a stakeholder analysis was performed. In the following, the main stakeholders are presented according to the level they operate on, which are the European level, the National level and the Basin level. However, there are also stakeholders that operate on several levels or are outside of this categorization, therefore, they are listed under other stakeholders. The stakeholders were identified through an iterative process including snowballing. The categorization of stakeholders is based on stakeholder theory as outlined in the method section.

6.1.1. European level

The stakeholders at the European level include the main European Union institutional bodies that are relevant for the Albanian accession process to become an EU member. The EU institutions supervise the Albanian accession process by screening the progress of implementing the EU acquis including the environmental regulatory framework protecting the Vjosa River. Moreover, they provide recommendations on the National Park status of the Vjosa River. Other actors at the European level include environmental NGOs lobbying for the protection of the Vjosa River at relevant EU institutions.

European Commission:

The European Commission is the EU executive body and supervises the accession process of Albania. It evaluates the country’s progress on implementing the EU acquis and relevant reforms to comply with EU standards. The preservation of the Vjosa River as an ecosystem of European importance due to its unique habitat characteristics is relevant to serve as a European reference water body for river restoration efforts. The declaration of the Vjosa National Park shows that Albania is willing to implement and enforce EU legislation on environmental objectives. The Commission urges Albania to strictly comply with Environmental Impact Assessments and public participation requirements for hydropower development and to cancel the existing concessions for hydropower plants on the Vjosa River (European Commission, 2022). The compliance with Environmental Impact Assessment, Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment, and public consultation requirements has been a major concern of the Commission in the Albanian accession process, hence, the declaration of the Vjosa National Park serves as a role model for other cases of Albanian river management. Moreover, the Commission recommended the diversification of Albania’s renewable energy mix and moving away from hydropower dam construction due to the detrimental impact on Albanian riverine ecosystems (European Commission, 2022)

European Parliament:

The European Parliament as the EU legislative body approves the European legislation on water and the environment. The Parliament discussed the state of the Vjosa River as an important condition for Albania's EU accession process. It recommended the declaration of a Vjosa National Park as part of the measures to take in order to comply with the EU acquis, which includes the Natura 2000, the Habitats and Water Framework Directives. As Albania is preparing the first River Basin Management Plans for its six main rivers, the EU provides assistance for the implementation of the Water Framework Directive. For the Vjosa Basin, the Parliament highlights strengthening transboundary cooperation with Greece in drafting the River Basin Management Plans and evaluating the tourism potential for the Vjosa Basin. Within the EU regulatory framework, public consultations and adhering to the legal requirements of EIAs and SEAs are important elements to increase awareness about the environmental and social impacts of hydropower projects. The Parliament recognizes that "two large HPPs on the Vjosa River and the Drin River have generated opposition from communities. Such investments require full compliance with the national legislation and the environmental and Energy Community acquis, notably with regards to public consultations and the quality of EIAs and SEAs. Further efforts are needed on framing HPP developments and on strictly enforcing environmental legislation" (European Parliament, 2022, p. 106).

In its progress reports on Albania (European Parliament, 2021, 2022), the Parliament urged the Albanian government to declare the Vjosa River a National Park and cancel all existing concessions for hydropower development on the river and its tributaries. Consequently, it also reiterated the investment priorities of European financial institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB) in the Albanian hydropower sector due to the lack of sound EIAs and SEAs, which led to investments in projects with negative social and environmental impacts (European Parliament, 2018). The Parliament "expresses deep concern about certain economic projects that have led to grave environmental damage in protected areas, such as large-scale tourist resorts and the hydropower plants along the Vjosa and Valbona rivers" (European Parliament, 2018, p. 7). Therefore, the Parliament recommends the diversification of the Albanian renewable energy mix by exploring alternatives to hydropower in order to reduce Albania's dependence on hydropower. In contrast to the two hydropower plants, the Vlora airport has not received as much attention on the European level. However, the Parliament has expressed criticism about building the Vlora airport in the Protected Area of the Vjosa-Narta Lagoon, especially highlighting the lack of a sound EIA.

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD):

The EBRD is a financial institution founded in 1991 dedicated to support the economic and societal transition of Eastern European and Balkan countries after the collapse of the Eastern bloc. Investments in infrastructure and energy grids have been among the 137 projects the EBRD has funded in Albania. Despite its policy to only invest in environmentally and socially sound projects, a study on multilateral development banks investing in hydropower projects in the Balkans has found it has been one of the investors in controversial hydropower projects in Albania (Vejnović, & Gallop, 2018). The financial support for hydropower projects was claimed only to be for safety and maintenance requirements but evidence shows that hydropower projects without sound EIAs and SEAs in protected areas have been funded by the ERBD (Vejnović, & Gallop, 2018). Hence, the European Parliament urged the ERBD to reconsider its investment priorities with regard to hydropower development in the Balkans (European Parliament, 2018). Consequently, it revised its stance on funding hydropower projects after they were facing major opposition from local community initiatives to stop planned projects and shifted its focus towards funding solar and wind energy.

Council of Europe:

The Council of Europe is an intergovernmental body with a mandate for upholding human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Its decision-making Committee is comprised of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of each member state. The Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats is a binding international legal instrument for the protection of flora and fauna

administered by the Council, which Albania ratified in 1999. Under the complaint mechanism of the Convention, the Committee of the Bern Convention received a complaint by EcoAlbania against the two hydropower plants Pocem and Kalivac in 2016. Since then, it issued recommendations urging the Albanian government to cancel the hydropower projects due to their negative impact on the riverine ecosystem, which were followed by the Albanian government with the declaration of the Vjosa National Park (Council of Europe, 2018). However, the Vlora airport is still under construction despite its location in a Protected Area and an Emerald candidate site, which is a network of Protected Areas covered by the Bern Convention (Council of Europe, 2023). The Albanian government altered the boundaries of the Vjosa-Narta Protected Area after the complaint by the environmental NGO PPNEA in order to avoid the cancellation of the airport concession. However, sound EIAs and a valid permit are still absent and have been subject to recommendations against the continuation of the airport construction by the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention (Council of Europe, 2023).

EuroNatur:

EuroNatur is a foundation dedicated to nature conservation and sustainable rural development with a focus on Eastern and Southeast Europe. It was founded in 1987 by the German Association for Environment and Nature Protection. The foundation advocates for the highest level of nature protection for Balkan rivers, supports local resistance to dam projects, and aims to reduce the investment in hydropower projects by financial institutions (EuroNatur, 2023a). The German NGO operates on the European level and has an office in Brussels at the European Parliament to lobby for nature, habitat and biodiversity conservation. It aims to channel resources to support local community resistance against hydropower projects and to divert funding on the European level away from hydropower dams (EuroNatur, 2023b). Moreover, raising public awareness about the importance of the Balkan rivers within the “Save the Blue Heart” campaign is one of the NGO’s central activities next to its activism.

EuroNatur views hydropower as the biggest threat to rivers in the Balkans and proposes the removal of dams instead of the continuous hydropower development on Albania’s rivers including the Vjosa River (EuroNatur, 2023b). The Vjosa River serves as a biodiversity hotspot that needs conservation and more research attention to serve as a blueprint for the restoration and conservation of other Balkan rivers and rivers across Europe. Building capacity for Albanian river management is one important long-term goal that could be achieved through the Vjosa campaign and the establishment of the Vjosa National Park. The Vjosa National Park is an ambitious management task for national and local authorities that are lacking experience with the management of such an extensive area. Hence, EuroNatur is involved in the process of drafting a management strategy together with international and Albanian experts.

RiverWatch:

Riverwatch was founded by ecologist Ulrich Eichelmann in 2012 and is an Austrian river protection organization that operates on the global level to prevent dam projects. The organization campaigns against dam projects, conducts scientific research and spreads awareness on ecological values (RiverWatch, 2023a). The NGO started the international campaign “Save the Blue Heart” to generate international support and spread awareness about the threat of hydropower to rivers in the Balkans. RiverWatch is opposing the trend of extensive hydropower development in the Balkans and Albania due to the damage inflicted on the unique Balkan rivers such as the Vjosa (RiverWatch, 2023a). The Vjosa is the central river around which the campaign is built because it can serve as a lesson for other Balkan states and is coined as the “Queen of European rivers”. The campaign recruited scientific experts to gather data on the Vjosa that can support the demands of the campaign.

The conservation of the last European wild river is intended to set an example for European River Management and to provide a blueprint approach for other Balkan rivers that are still in good ecological condition. The threat of hydropower development is one of the biggest to riverine ecosystems and the endangered species in the Balkans. Hence, it is part of the anti-dam movement due to the negative effect of dams on the riverine ecosystems but also on local communities and their livelihoods related to the alteration of the river flow and its impact on people’s everyday lives (RiverWatch, 2023b). To support the

demands of the campaign and because the Vjosa River serves as a reference river for river restoration, gathering scientific data on it is an important tool for RiverWatch to achieve their campaign goals. The conservation of endemic and endangered species listed under the IUCN red list, the Albanian red list, and the Annex of the Bern Convention is one of the main priorities for the NGO (RiverWatch, 2023b).

6.1.2. National Level

The stakeholders at the national level are governmental bodies that are responsible for national policies and their implementation. Moreover, environmental NGOs and national media also play an important role in increasing domestic attention for the Vjosa River and to involve citizens and organizations at the local level.

National Government of Albania:

Since 2021, the government is headed by Prime Minister Edi Rama, who has been elected for his third term, and is the leader of the Socialist Party. The Democratic Party is the main opposition party, however, it was unable to challenge the Socialists majority in recent years. The Democratic Party boycotted the 2019 municipal elections and accused Edi Rama of election fraud, hence, political tensions and a strong rivalry between these two parties remain. The central government provides an overarching national framework for river management and sectoral policies that affect the Vjosa River within the National Strategy for Integrated Management of Water Resources 2017-2027. The government aims to optimize the use of Albania's freshwater resources for the country's rural development and has to find synergies within the Water-Energy-Food nexus that causes trade-offs between increasing energy demand from hydropower and irrigation for agricultural production. Since the EU accession process was officially opened in the Intergovernmental Conference with Albania in July 2022, the government needs to comply with EU regulations on river management and protected areas to advance the EU accession process.

During the 2021 elections, the Vjosa National Park was a topic of discussion that was brought up by the NGOs during election campaigns and in interviews with the running candidates. According to the coalition of NGOs, the government was not supportive of the Vjosa National Park due to the contractual concessions made to hydropower companies and their aim to guarantee energy security from Albania's abundant water resources. Due to the pressure generated by environmental NGOs, the government adapted its policy on the Vjosa River to generate electoral support during national elections. It wants to promote rural development and energy security while also implementing environmental laws to further EU accession. There is a trade-off between the positive impact of the National Park on Albania's EU accession prospects and the potential to enhance tourism opportunities and exploit the Vjosa River for energy generation. Within the National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development 2019-2023 the government aims to strengthen low-impact tourism in the Vjosa Valley and explore the tourism potential that would be generated by the National Park (MoTE, 2018).

Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy (MoIE):

This Ministry is in charge of sectoral policies for energy generation and supply that are mainly related to hydropower development but have been expanded recently by the exploration of alternative energy sources (MoIE, 2018). The diversification of Albania's energy mix requires a shift away from hydropower towards alternative renewable energy sources such as solar and wind energy. Moreover, the Ministry needs to screen existing hydropower concessions related on the Vjosa River and its tributaries in order to determine their feasibility with the National Park status. The National Energy Strategy 2018-2030 sets out goals and measures to comply with the standards by the European Energy Union and relevant EU Directives to increase energy efficiency, enhance energy security through diversification and expand renewable energy production (USAID, 2018).

The Vjosa catchment is subject to several infrastructure projects including the Vlora airport in the Vjosa-Narta Lagoon and several hydropower plants on the Vjosa River and its tributaries. In a feasibility study on the airport, the Ministry highlighted that no negative environmental impacts are expected except for noise pollution (MoIE, 2020). However, the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention recommended

the cancellation of the Vlora airport due to its location in a Protected Area and its negative impact on migratory bird species (Council of Europe, 2023). The lack of transparency regarding the permit of the construction company and the lack of disclosure of maps of the airport were pointed out in the complaint against the airport. With the National Park status, the approval of new infrastructure projects is subjected to restrictions and opposition by civil society putting constraints on the future planning of the Ministry. The main concern for establishing the National Park also relates to the development of tourism infrastructure to make the Vjosa Valley more accessible. Hence, trade-offs have to be made between the expansion of tourism infrastructure and the nature conservation objectives of the National Park.

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD):

The Ministry is responsible for regulating the development of the agricultural sector and improving the livelihoods of the rural population. Through the Program of Agriculture and Rural Development (IPARD) co-funded by the Albanian government and the EU, additional investments into the Albanian agricultural sector are made for the production and processing of dairy, meat, vegetables, herbs, and vineyards (MoARD, 2022). Hence, the agricultural sector in Albania is expected to expand putting more pressure on freshwater resources for irrigation. The sustainable development of the agricultural sector by introducing modern agricultural technologies, regulating riverine pollution from agriculture, and increasing rural development along the Vjosa River are important future objectives of the Ministry (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2022). The Ministry is also responsible for developing and implementing the River Basin Management Plans (RBMP), however, due to the political contestation surrounding the Vjosa River the River Basin Management Plan has not been finalized yet. The World Bank provided funding for assisting the Water Resources and Irrigation Project which is aimed to provide institutional support for irrigation and integrated water resource management while also supporting the implementation of the project (World Bank, 2022). The Vjosa National Park is supported because it is expected to increase the rural development of the area through tourism development. It is also part of a strategy to generate agrotourism and ecotourism in the region.

Ministry of Tourism and Environment (MoTE):

The Ministry develops policies on the conservation of the Vjosa River while simultaneously exploring the options for tourism development related to the National Park. It approves the Environmental Impact Assessments and Strategic Environmental Assessments for territorial and sectoral plans. Hence, the double mandate of the Ministry needs to find a balance between the expansion of tourism in the region and the implementation of a feasible management scheme for the National Park. A management plan for the National Park and the design of a tourism strategy are currently being developed by the Ministry in collaboration with Patagonia, the IUCN and a Team of 30 Albanian and international scientists (IUCN, MoTE, & Patagonia, 2022).

The Vjosa River is seen as a source of revenue for the tourism industry in Albania but the management scheme for the National Park needs to be designed to uphold the ecological integrity of the river. The National Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism 2019-2023 is aimed at expanding the ecotourism sector in Albania by promoting low-impact and agrotourism in the Vjosa Basin (MoTE, 2019). However, the construction of the Vlora airport in the Protected Area of the Vjosa-Narta lagoon indicates a more mass-oriented tourism development in the region. A feasible management plan for the National Park is a priority in order to preserve the riverine ecosystem and to comply with IUCN standards for National Parks.

National Agency for Protected Areas (NAPA):

The agency is responsible for the management of Protected Areas in Albania at the national level and it develops management plans and strategies according to scientific data available and in line with national and international regulations. The agency has 12 regional Directorates to supervise the Protected Areas in each region, however, a lack of personnel and financial capacity has constrained their monitoring ability at the regional scale. The distribution of environmental data to the public and the development of

methodologies to design and manage protected areas is part of the agency's tasks. Moreover, the financial management of the protected areas is delegated to this agency by the Ministry of Tourism and the Environment. It advocates for the Vjosa River to be preserved as a natural and free-flowing river. In order to cover the full course of the river, NAPA is cooperating with the Greek water management authorities to create a shared Greek-Albanian cross-border National Park (NAPA, 2023). As it is the first time managing a Wild River National Park including the whole course of the river and the floodplains around it, institutional capacity needs to be developed in order to tackle the implementation challenges that are expected. The River Basin Management Plan for the Vjosa River is currently being developed and needs to be coordinated with the management of the National Park.

National Water Council (NWC):

The National Water Council is the inter-institutional decision-making body responsible for Integrated Water Resource Management and approves the River Basin Management Plans for Albania's six main rivers. The Prime Minister functions as a chairman and supervises the Council meetings that are comprised of the Ministers of sectoral government departments affecting Albanian water policies. The Water Council sets out the overarching policy for water resource management and delegates its implementation to the Water Resource Management Agency. The drafting of River Basin Management Plans is carried out by individual River Basin Councils supervised by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The River Basin Management Plan for the Vjosa River is still in the drafting phase and the River Basin Council responsible for the daily management tasks lacks internet presence so far. Within the framework of EU accession assistance, Albania is receiving EU funding to integrate water management among other sectors and create capacity for the implementation of the Water Framework Directive (European Commission, 2017).

The National Water Council stepped away from its initial decision to declare the Vjosa River a Nature Park of a lower protection category IV to a National Park after the Vjosa National Park campaign received international attention. It implemented the recommendations issued by the European Parliament and the Bern Convention on the declaration of the Vjosa National Park as a category II according to IUCN standards.

Water Resource Management Agency (WRMA):

As the executive body of the National Water Council, this agency is responsible for monitoring Integrated Water Resource Management at the Basin level in Albania. It also issues permits for the use of the river and regulates water pricing for drinking water. It implements the decision of the National Water Council and is currently working on a management scheme for the National Park together with the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, Patagonia, IUCN, and a team of 30 national and international experts. The EU is currently providing funding for building capacity for Integrated Water Resource Management and assist the necessary reforms in the Albanian water sector to implement the Water Framework Directive. The implementation of the Water Framework Directive requires the consultation of stakeholders and the draft of a River Basin Management Plan for the Vjosa River is currently in development.

EcoAlbania:

A joint collaboration between the University of Tirana and the "Save the Blue Heart" campaign led to the foundation of the NGO in 2014. The Vjosa National Park campaign started as a response to the proposed hydropower projects in Kalivac and Pocem by the Albanian government in 2014. Their main activities include scientific research, environmental education, public awareness campaigns, and protection and management strategies within Albania and its neighboring countries (EcoAlbania, 2023). As the initiator of the "Vjosa National Park" campaign, the NGO aimed to generate domestic support for creating a Vjosa National Park and empowering local communities against hydropower projects. EcoAlbania started the environmental movement around the Vjosa River ten years ago and used litigation to defend the integrity of the ecosystem (EcoAlbania, 2021b). Moreover, it connected local actors to exert pressure on decision-makers to enhance the protection status of the Vjosa River and involve the international media to

gain attention for the creation of the Vjosa National Park (EcoAlbania, 2023). The mobilization of support at the European Parliament, the IUCN and Patagonia helped to spread awareness about the importance of the Vjosa River as an ecosystem and highlight how uncontrollable hydropower development is affecting the Balkan states.

EcoAlbania advocates for the protection of the Vjosa River as a unique ecosystem of European importance under the highest IUCN standard of Protected Areas category II. The NGO demands the abandoning of all hydropower projects on the Vjosa River and its free-flowing tributaries. Moreover, they aim to enhance public engagement for decisions on the Vjosa River to include local communities that are affected by hydropower development. The provision of alternative renewable energy sources such as solar and wind energy is a priority to reduce Albania's hydropower dependence, therefore, EcoAlbania has initiated the "Solar in Kute" pilot project to show how solar energy can provide a feasible alternative to hydropower (EcoAlbania, 2021a). Through the involvement of national and international scientific experts, the campaign managed to gather new scientific data on the Vjosa River that substantiated their demand for the Vjosa National Park.

6.1.3. Basin Level

At the local level, civil society can be categorized into different social groups with diverging interests. Those interests are represented by municipal authorities that implement national policies and are responsible for the development of rural villages along the Vjosa River and to tailor sectoral policies to the conditions at the local level.

Local Environmental Movements:

A collective of villagers from the municipality of Kute located between the planned hydropower plants of Pecem and Kalivac joined the Vjosa National Park campaign to resist against those projects due to the detrimental impact on the village. With the support of EcoAlbania, the community became the first solar village in Albania to prove that hydropower is not the only alternative for energy generation in Albania (EcoAlbania, 2021a). Residents of several municipalities either joined protests against the hydropower dams and for the National Park or took part in the legal action against those projects. They aim to prevent the construction of hydropower plants and their impact on their local livelihoods. Moreover, they demand increasing participation in river management in Albania, which serves as a driver for the democratization process and builds capacity for public participation at the local level. The collaboration between the local environmental movements and the National Park campaign provides an alternative vision for the Vjosa River that is tailored to local needs.

The integrity of local communities' livelihoods is tied to the Vjosa River and its traditional use for irrigation and grazing. The emotional relationship with the river and resistance against the Albanian government's decision evoked a strong environmental movement (Patagonia, 2021). The local communities' self-determination and development are coupled to the Vjosa River and needs to be considered in the decision-making process. The local communities support tourism development that is promoted through the National Park. Even though they are against hydropower development, most locals support the construction of the Vlora airport in the protected Vjosa-Narta Lagoon as it serves rural development interests in the Vjosa Valley.

Farmers:

Small-holder farmers are the main agricultural producers along the Vjosa River and provide employment in the region. Most of them still farm traditionally but a shift towards industrial agriculture is promoted by rural development programs by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD, 2022). Farmers depend on the Vjosa River for irrigation and would need to be compensated if their land would be flooded through a hydropower dam creating a reservoir. They mostly produce wine, dairy, olives, fish, and herbs for export (MoARD, 2022). Their dependence on the Vjosa River for the irrigation of their crops and the potential flooding of their property would have been compromised by hydropower development, leading to the rivers flow alterations. Farmers do not support hydropower development

along the Vjosa River due to the conflicting user rights between energy generation and irrigation. However, agritourism opportunities are created through the Vjosa National Park and could enhance local livelihoods by enabling farmers to share their traditional farming practices and sell locally produced food to tourists (MoARD, 2022).

Municipal Governments:

The responsibility for local spatial planning lies with the municipal governments, which need to implement national regulations and take into account the local community's needs. Hence, they coordinate local river management and regional development, which need to be weighed with the conservation of the Vjosa River. Their mandate is to enhance local livelihoods and coordinate sectoral policies concerning the river. On behalf of their residents, five mayors of the municipalities of Tepelena, Selenica, Memaliaj, Përmet, and Mallakastër submitted a letter to the Albanian Prime Minister urging him to protect the Vjosa River along its entire course by establishing the Vjosa National Park (Kapllanaj & others, 2017). They highlight the importance of the intact river ecosystem for the livelihoods of local people, their employment and the cultural value of the river. Conflicting objectives in terms of spatial planning, rural development, irrigation, tourism, and nature conservation are clashing at the municipal level. These different goals need to be integrated with the management of the National Park and require the consultation of local municipalities and their residents.

Eco-Tourism Sector:

The Vjosa Valley is one of the Albania government's tourism focus areas outlined in the National Tourism Strategy due to its high tourism potential. However, the lack of tourism infrastructure, a proper marketing strategy and its difficult accessibility due to its rural character are posing some challenges for tourism development (Branko, 2022). The local agro- and ecotourism sectors are slowly developing along the Vjosa River and require more funding and coordination to expand in a sustainable way. The Vjosa's National Park status would benefit local tourism with low impact on the environment to show Albanian natural heritage. The Vjosa River offers opportunities for hiking, camping, rafting, cultural and culinary experiences that would facilitate rural development (Branko, 2022). Transboundary cooperation with the Greek tourism sector was realized in an Eco-Museum on the Vjosa/Aoos cultural background facilitated by local communities, which creates revenue for economic development in the region and enables locals to share their culture (Sorotou, 2014). The international attention on the Vjosa River attracts visitors and needs to be accompanied by feasible strategies for ecotourism and making the Vjosa Valley accessible for tourists. However, an unregulated inflow of tourists would endanger the objectives of the National Park, hence, the tourism sector needs to be developed under restricted circumstances that account for the highest protection standards by the IUCN.

6.1.4. Other Stakeholders

The following stakeholders either operate on several levels or on a global level and, therefore, transcend the European level meaning that they cannot be clearly attributed to the other levels. However, they are still involved in decisions on the Vjosa River or have contributed to the discourse on the National Park.

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN):

The IUCN sets out standards for the conservation of endangered species and habitats within different management schemes. It is an international nature conservation organization comprised of governmental and non-governmental actors. It has contributed to gathering scientific data on the Vjosa River and supported the declaration of a National Park of category II as the highest protection standard. They outlined a categorization of species according to their level of endangerment and recommended scientifically based action for Albania to take in order to protect the Vjosa River and its flora and fauna (Sovinc, 2021). In a feasibility study on the Vjosa National Park, it set out all the criteria and standards to conserve endangered species and provide optimal protection for the riverine ecosystem (IUCN, MoTE, & Patagonia, 2022). Due to their scientific expertise, a team of scientists by the IUCN is currently involved in the drafting of a feasible management scheme for the Vjosa National Park.

Scientific Experts:

Different research communities have been involved during the Vjosa National Park campaign by informing the decisions taken on the Vjosa River. They are mostly involved in performing Environmental Impact Assessments and gathering hydrological and geomorphological data but also studying flora and fauna (Schiemer et al., 2020). The main research institute domestically includes the University of Tirana, which is complemented by international research teams from the University of Vienna and the French Research Institute for the Conservation of Mediterranean Wetlands. Throughout a three-year memorandum of understanding on the hydropower plants in Kalivac and Pocem, those research institutes sent experts to provide evidence on the endangered and endemic species present in the Vjosa River, which would be negatively impacted by the hydropower plants. The interest of scientific experts in the Vjosa River was stimulated through the Vjosa National Park campaign and the complaints to the Bern Convention about the hydropower plants and the Vlora airport in the Vjosa-Narta Protected Area. Within the context of a Science Week in 2021, international and national researchers have gathered data on the Vjosa River with the goal to inform decisions on the National Park and to support legal action against hydropower development on the Vjosa River and its tributaries (EuroNatur, 2021). Moreover, international and domestic researchers and students show increasing attention for Balkan rivers and the effects of hydropower development on the riverine ecosystems. Scientific data supported the Vjosa National Park campaign and is expected to inform the design of the management scheme for the National Park.

Hydropower Companies

The concessions for the hydropower plants in Kalivac and Pocem have been granted to the Italian Becchetti Energy Group and two Turkish construction companies, namely the Ayen Energij Alb and Cinar-San Limited in 2016. All of these companies have been involved in the construction of other hydropower plants across the Balkans and Albania. As they are located outside of Albania and are mainly exporting the energy generated, the contribution of these projects to Albanian energy security would have been limited. Due to a lack of sound Environmental Impact Assessments, the companies have been found in breach of national and international law regarding the consideration of the environmental and social impacts of the hydropower plants on the Vjosa River (Council of Europe, 2017). Moreover, public hearings have not been conducted with local communities impacted by the hydropower plants constituting contract violations by the companies. The initial goal of the hydropower plants was to satisfy domestic energy demand in Albania, however, the companies were permitted to export electricity to Italy and Turkey. Hence, the projects supported the commercialization of the Vjosa River for foreign electricity needs without sound Environmental Impact Assessments and public consultation. The memorandum of understanding recommended by the Bern Convention led to the cancellation of the contracts with the three companies (MoTE, 2022).

Patagonia:

Patagonia is considered an international donor as the company promotes environmental protection by dedicating 1% of its revenue to funding environmental campaigns. Patagonia has set up Patagonia Works and the 1% for the Planet foundation to invest revenue into environmental restoration campaigns and funds environmental organizations that aim to improve environmental justice (1% for the Planet, 2022). The company uses its international range to generate attention for local environmental protection around the world. Patagonia got involved in 2016 and provided funding to the coalition by RiverWatch, EuroNatur and EcoAlbania to promote their goal of a Wild River National Park (Patagonia & Baker, 2023). Patagonia's CEO Ryan Gellert has spent a night at the Vjosa River to generate international attention for the National Park campaign and has been present at the declaration ceremony in Tepelena in March 2023. The company promoted the campaign through Patagonia's wide social media presence and contributed to it by making the "Vjosa Forever" short film to highlight the importance of the Vjosa River internationally but mostly for the local communities' daily lives (Patagonia, 2021).

National/International Media:

The media coverage of the Vjosa case has picked up in recent years when the international media became more involved in the Vjosa National Park campaign through Patagonia and when actor Leonardo DiCaprio shared the campaign on his Instagram page in 2019 (EuroNatur & RiverWatch, 2019). Beforehand, the domestic media only covered the lawsuits by the NGOs against the Kalivac and Pocem hydropower plants, however, no mainstream coverage was reached according to member of EURACTIVE¹. Even though a report by EcoAlbania (2021) outlined that the lawsuits on behalf of the Vjosa River received the highest media coverage in the history of environmental movements in Albania, international media reported more on the case than domestic media. Hence, national media has not yet become a major platform generating attention for the Vjosa River but is still in the process of mainstreaming environmental issues.

This stakeholder analysis has outlined the involved stakeholders on the European, National and Basin levels related to the Vjosa case. Their main interests and position on the Vjosa River were highlighted and are analyzed in-depth in the following section.

7. Interviews

7.1. List of Interviewees

This section highlights the key take aways from the semi-structured interviews with mostly niche and landscape actors. The opportunities to speak with Albanian government officials were limited due to the lack of access to personal contact information and the language barrier. Moreover, the snowballing technique drawing on EcoAlbania and EuroNatur’s networks automatically led to getting in touch with campaign affiliated respondents. However, a sample of respondents working on the European, National and Basin level was identified and expanded iteratively due to personal contacts. In the following, after analyzing the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews, the visions and agency of different actors were identified.

Table 4. List of interviewees and their position.

Organization	Position	Reference
EcoAlbania	Nature Conservation Policy Expert	EcoAlbania Interviewee ²
EuroNatur	Policy Manager for Balkan Rivers	EuroNatur Interviewee ³
EuroNatur	EU Policy Officer for the Protection of Flora and Fauna	EuroNatur Interviewee ⁴
EURACTIVE	Editor EURACTIVE Albania & Exit.al	EURACTIVE Interviewee ⁵
IUCN	Vice Chair IUCN Committee of Europe, Freelance Environmental Consultant for Patagonia	IUCN Interviewee ⁶

7.2. Stakeholders’ Visions

In the following, the concept of visions employed by Van der Voorn & Quist (2018), which are based on alternative worldviews that are not shared by large groups in society and have commonalities such as an image of the future, an ideal, or a desire for change, is applied to the interview findings. It helps to identify stakeholders’ worldviews underlying their actions and their desired change for the Vjosa River and Albanian river management more broadly. Often, their vision even goes beyond the Albanian context but also formulates a common vision for other Balkan countries with free-flowing rivers. Moreover, the

¹ Personal communication, EURACTIVE interviewee, May 9th, 2023.

² Personal communication, EcoAlbania interviewee, March 29th, 2023.

³ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, April 13th, 2023.

⁴ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, May 23rd, 2023.

⁵ Personal communication, EURACTIVE interviewee, May 9th, 2023.

⁶ Personal communication, IUCN interviewee, May 17th, 2023.

development of their vision from a niche of environmental activism already gained wider acceptance in the Albanian population. This section focuses on common visions among stakeholders, conflicts, and key contributions to the National Park process.

7.2.1. Common Visions

The environmental NGOs EcoAlbania and EuroNatur share a common vision related to their campaign, even though they advocate for their goal on different levels. This leads to nuanced differences in terms of their vision for the level they act on. EcoAlbania, EuroNatur and RiverWatch have been the longest politically involved stakeholders in the campaign around the Vjosa River and have shaped the vision of the National Park campaign over the last 10 years. Even though the campaign started out with mainly preventing hydropower development on the Vjosa River and its tributaries, the campaign developed a more ambitious vision of the first Wild River National Park according to the highest IUCN protection standards. According to a member of EcoAlbania⁷ “this level of protection ensures that the natural processes along the river will be kept untouched, which means the human interventions will be at the minimum possible and will be just to provide some basic and vital benefits mainly to the community living next to the National Park.”. EcoAlbania’s more local vision concerns reducing Albania’s dependence on hydropower by showing the success of its “Solar in Kute” pilot project providing an alternative to hydropower and highlighting the potential for a diversified energy mix (EcoAlbania, 2021a). Another shared aim is to reconcile the objectives of the National Park and the local communities’ needs, which was highlighted by members of EuroNatur, EcoAlbania and the IUCN. Hence, this vision is translated into action by starting a *Stakeholder Engagement Process*, which is a participatory process for the design and implementation of the Vjosa National Park. It is intended to facilitate consensus among stakeholders and to create a local vision for the National Park⁸.

The IUCN forwarded their vision of protecting the Vjosa River according to the highest protection standard within its framework of Protected Areas due to the high conservation value of the river (Sovinc, 2021, IUCN, MoTE, & Patagonia, 2022). Hence, their vision is based on the scientific interest of the conservation community to preserve such a unique ecosystem, which corresponds with the NGOs’ vision to integrate more scientific knowledge into decisions on the Vjosa River. The feasibility study produced by the IUCN, Patagonia, and the Ministry of Tourism and Environment (2022) provided an opportunity to develop a common vision together with the Albanian government. The study sets out the main vision to be that “the Vjosa-Aoös River, from its source to the sea, including all tributaries, is afforded full national and transboundary protection, to the highest international standards, and is effectively conserved as a living, wild, free-flowing river, to the benefit of people and nature in Albania, Greece, and the world.” (p.7). Hence, it aims to integrate Albania’s national vision for the Vjosa River with the international ambitions of the nature conservation community by highlighting the free-flowing nature of the river. Patagonia’s input is based on their worldview of contributing to environmental justice while the IUCN is motivated by scientific interest and the conservation of flora and fauna of this unique riverine ecosystem. The Ministry of Tourism and Environment’s double mandate to ensure nature protection and tourism development steers their vision to integrate both objectives within the framework of the National Park.

The EU level has influenced the overall development of the Albanian accession process, therefore EU norms are going to influence Albanian river management in the coming years. The vision for European nature conservation is enshrined in the European Biodiversity Strategy which sets out that by 2030 30% of all land ecosystems should be Protected Areas and 10% need to be strictly protected (European Commission, 2020a). A member of the IUCN⁹ stresses that “this National Park is a major contribution to this 30 percent target because it's a nationally protected area that will count to this target and it's a category two which counts to the 10%, so to strictly protected areas.” Hence, the Vjosa National Park would contribute significantly to the EU vision for nature conservation once Albania completes the accession

⁷ Personal communication, EcoAlbania interviewee, March 29th, 2023.

⁸ Personal communication, IUCN interviewee, May 17th, 2023.

⁹ Personal communication, IUCN interviewee, May 17th, 2023.

process. It would also strengthen Albania's performance under the EU acquis related to the Chapter on the environment once it is under screening¹⁰.

One problem that remains on the European level, concerns the Renewable Energy Directive (2018/2001/EU), in which the EU has not recognized the negative impacts of hydropower on freshwater ecosystems and has not advised against the use of hydropower for energy generation. This would obstruct the European Commission's aim to restore 25.000 km of freshwater ecosystem to a free-flowing state by 2030 (European Commission, 2020a). One member of EuroNatur¹¹ attributes the hesitation of reconsidering hydropower as a renewable energy source to the perception of hydropower on the European level, which considers small-scale projects as good and local. The perception of hydropower on the European and national levels is, however, changing. A member of EURACTIVE¹² in turn mentioned that within 10 years, public opinion on hydropower in Albania changed from being a widely accepted energy source toward local resistance against new hydropower plants. Moreover, the approval rate of the Vjosa National Park is estimated to be around 80 percent within the Albanian population. In contrast, on the EU level, there appears to be a divide between an Eastern and Western European approach to hydropower development. According to a member of EuroNatur¹³, rural and economic development are the main priorities for Eastern and Southeastern European countries, therefore, hydropower and infrastructure development are enabled by EU accession funds and support their vision for economic development by using available natural resources. The EuroNatur interviewee highlights the short-term construction boom caused by EU accession funding as, for example, "the European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion funds, were given quite a lot to countries to grow, but growth for them was building roads and airports"¹⁴, which has caused environmental degradation and did not lead to long-term improvements. Hence, Eastern European and Balkan countries are currently following a Western growth narrative and are dedicating EU accession funds to large-scale infrastructure development disrupting intact ecosystems such as the Vjosa River.

The international media, which was mobilized by EuroNatur, RiverWatch and EcoAlbania, played a big role in spreading awareness about the Vjosa case and increasing pressure on the government. Spreading awareness about the destructive impacts of hydropower among the Albanian population and mainstreaming environmental issues into Albanian media was a shared vision among the NGOs. A member of EURACTIVE¹⁵ stressed that international media attention was higher during the campaign than local news coverage, which shows the deficit related to environmental issues receiving media attention in Albania. However, the vision for the domestic media by the NGOs is to mainstream coverage of environmental issues and to increase transparency about environmental decision-making related to the Vjosa River¹⁶. The government has used the domestic mainstream media to frame its vision of hydropower development as a means for achieving the green energy transition in Albania and satisfying increasing energy demand¹⁷. However, the social and environmental impacts were disregarded and the Protected Area status was amended in the case of the Vlora airport in the Vjosa-Narta Lagoon. Hence, within the government, trade-offs related to their vision of a Vjosa National Park, which generates tourism and economic development in the Vjosa Valley, while also respecting its Protected Area status and complying with EU regulations related to the Water Framework Directive, Environmental Impact Assessments, and stakeholder participation exist. However, the niche vision of a Vjosa National Park

¹⁰ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, May 23rd, 2023.

¹¹ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, May 23rd, 2023.

¹² Personal communication, EURACTIVE interviewee, May 9th, 2023.

¹³ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, May 23rd, 2023.

¹⁴ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, May 23rd, 2023.

¹⁵ Personal communication, EURACTIVE interviewee, May 9th, 2023.

¹⁶ Personal communication, EcoAlbania interviewee, March 29th, 2023.

¹⁷ Personal communication, EURACTIVE interviewee, May 9th, 2023.

according to the highest IUCN standards has been taken up by regime actors such as the government, who have identified benefits related to this niche innovation.

7.2.2. Conflicting Visions

Throughout the 10-year period of the Vjosa National Park campaign common visions but also conflicting ones have developed over time due to diverging dynamics on the landscape, regime and niche levels. The main obstacles to achieving the above-mentioned common visions were mainly related to regime actors such as the Albanian government that perceive energy security and financial gains as more important than environmental protection. One member of EcoAlbania¹⁸ made clear that

“the government wasn't the best ally and wasn't supporting the process and the reason, I think is because of the conflict with the private entities that had the contracts to build the dams along the Vjosa River. Also because the Vjosa is a huge and very large river, so having it as a protected area has always been seen as a challenge and as a burden for the government on how to manage the resources that it takes to properly ensure the management and conservation of this huge area.”

This shows diverging visions from the government as a regime actor due to its acceptance of hydropower as a renewable energy source and the lack of institutional capacity to manage protected areas according to international standards. However, the persistence of the campaign shifted the government's attitude towards understanding

“that the environment is a priority, and regardless of energy needs and energy priorities for the country still the environment needs to be preserved and there are some environmental properties that need to be preserved as they are, and from an environmental aspect this is a huge win.”¹⁹.

Consequently, the vision of a Vjosa National Park diffused from its innovative niche towards the regime level when it was declared by the Prime Minister in March 2023. The highest protection status, however, was advocated by the IUCN, Patagonia, and the NGOs, while the Albanian government intended to opt for a Nature Park placing fewer restrictions on the economic development of the region (MoTE, 2022).

Another conflict surrounds the vision related to tourism development in the Vjosa Valley promoted by the National Park. Even though the government stated its sustainable tourism ambitions within their National Tourism Strategy 2019-2030, which includes low-impact tourism, the construction of the Vlora airport within the Protected Area of the Vjosa-Narta Lagoon indicates a rather mass-tourism-oriented development. One member of EuroNatur²⁰ is worried that, since Patagonia got involved, the Albanian government perceives the National Park as a foreign investment opportunity instead of a contribution to nature conservation. Hence, another member of EuroNatur²¹ expressed her concern about the government's lack of support throughout the campaign until an opportunity for development occurred with the involvement of international actors spreading awareness about the Vjosa case. She highlighted that the government took advantage of the generated attention which was

“done by nature conservation organizations that have taken on promotion for years, that have put the topic into everyone's mouth and then the government comes and says yes, we'll take care of it from here”²².

This adaption of niche visions by regime actors for the purpose of maintaining the incumbent regime and allowing only moderate changes shows that the government's vision does not align with the NGOs niche vision. However, it exemplifies the take up of elements of niche visions into the regime by inducing incremental reforms that still benefit the regime (Geels, 2011).

The overarching vision of stopping hydropower development in the Balkans and applying the Wild River National Park status to other rivers is in conflict with the Balkan states' governments' willingness to

¹⁸ Personal communication, EcoAlbania interviewee, March 29th, 2023.

¹⁹ Personal communication, EcoAlbania interviewee, March 29th, 2023.

²⁰ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, May 23rd, 2023.

²¹ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, April 13th, 2023.

²² Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, April 13th, 2023.

continue to invest in hydropower. In Bosnia, Montenegro, and Serbia there are still hundreds of planned hydropower plants that would dam some of the last free-flowing rivers in Europe (RiverWatch, 2023b). However, a shift is slowly occurring as bottom-up grassroots movements are resisting uncontrolled hydropower expansion. Hence, conflicting visions among niche actors such as local environmental movements and regime actors including the government are clashing. The Albanian government's vision to become an EU member depends on their compliance with the EU *acquis*, where hydropower is contributing to reaching EU renewable energy targets, while also needing to comply with environmental protection standards. Hence, internal conflict within this vision creates trade-offs in terms of favorable EU accession conditions and resulted in a take up of niche visions into the dominant regime.

7.3. Stakeholders' Agency

Agency relates to the capacity of actors to exert pressure on the regime and seize windows of opportunity for transformative change (Van der Voorn & Quist, 2018). Hence, actors and their networks contribute to the breakthrough of their niche visions.

The legal effect the Vjosa National Park campaign had is perceived positively by the three NGOs with creating

“a precedent for all the similar cases where certain areas are identified as important in terms of biodiversity. So now there is an example that you can achieve that. And that environmental legislation is taken more seriously now, but also having those practices established, it will be easier also for other organizations and how they should take care of similar cases, not only regarding hydropower”²³.

This led to the improved enforcement of environmental law in Albania. Hence, being able to challenge the concessions made by the government based on the lack of sound Environmental Impact Assessments and Strategic Environmental Assessments encourages more transparency on environmental impacts and reduces corruption regarding EIAs (Williams & Depuy, 2017). The new type of Wild River National Park “is a legal tool to make sure that all the institutions or policies and plans are built around this legal framework that forces them towards this objective”²⁴, which integrates a niche vision into the regime. The case also strengthens the role of civil society in Albanian river management as environmental NGOs are provided with effective legal tools to challenge decisions by the government related to hydropower development and construction projects. Therefore, public participation in Albanian river management is promoted through the Vjosa National Park campaign and is a key element of the common vision of the three NGOs.

Through the establishment of the Vjosa National Park environmental issues gained more salience in the political discourse and reached the political agenda. According to a member of EcoAlbania²⁵, the consistency of the National Park campaign was the key element of spreading public awareness as “this is a 10-year process and it takes a lot, a lot of time to explain, build trust and explain the consequences and the impacts and understand also the relevance of keeping Vjosa as it is”. Moreover, re-establishing trust in political commitments within the local population is important to overcome the legacy of the Communist regime that undermined trust in political authorities²⁶. As environmental grassroots movements are still relatively recent in Albania, the National Park campaign showed that through pressure from below change can be induced. Therefore, a member of EuroNatur²⁷ thinks “that it certainly created a bit of inspiration for local activism.”

The negotiation process on the management plan of the National Park provided an important window of opportunity when the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, IUCN, and Patagonia worked on a common vision for the Vjosa River. Hence, the IUCN provided scientific advice on how to best

²³ Personal communication, EcoAlbania interviewee, March 29th, 2023.

²⁴ Personal communication, EcoAlbania interviewee, March 29th, 2023.

²⁵ Personal communication, EcoAlbania interviewee, March 29th, 2023.

²⁶ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, April 13th, 2023.

²⁷ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, April 13th, 2023.

implement the international standards for the highest protection category while Patagonia provided financial support for the future management of the National Park. The window of opportunity for the breakthrough of the niche vision of the National Park was indicated by members of EuroNatur and the IUCN²⁸ to be the involvement of Patagonia as an international actor generating international attention and financial support. Patagonia’s agency coupled with the IUCN’s scientific advice created favorable conditions for the take up of a new type of National Park. According to a member of the IUCN²⁹ they “will establish a regional unit just for this part so the regional units are called RAPA meaning Regional Agency for protected areas and we are preparing now all the legal documents that this new structure will be funded and established. This is not the end because we would like to make this structure independent from the current system.” This regional unit is supposed to close the gap between national and local administration of Protected Areas as the Vjosa River crosses several local administrative units for Protected Areas that lacked the capacity to cooperate efficiently (IUCN, MoTE & Patagonia, 2022). Therefore, through innovative approaches, the IUCN and Patagonia aim to improve the current management structure in order to fulfill the international standards for the National Park.

8. Analysis

8.1. Transition Theory

This section identifies the dynamics in Albanian river management related to the Vjosa River on the niche, regime, and landscape levels according to the Multi-Level Perspective by Geels (2011). It interprets the findings of the stakeholder analysis and semi-structured interviews by identifying the potential for transformative change in Albanian river management induced by the declaration of the Vjosa National Park. Figure six provides a simplified overview of the dynamics among the landscape, regime, and niche levels.

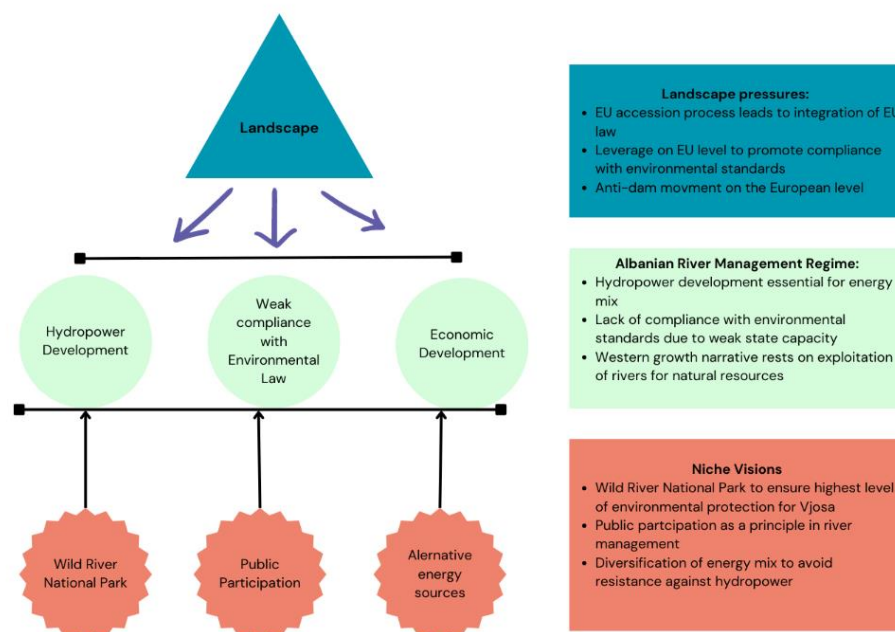


Figure 6. Overview of transition dynamics on the landscape, regime, and niche levels.

²⁸ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, April 13th, 2023, Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, May 23rd, 2023, Personal communication, IUCN interviewee, May 17th, 2023.

²⁹ Personal communication, IUCN interviewee, May 17th, 2023.

8.1.1. Niche Level

The dynamics at the niche level are characterized by grassroots movements centered around the vision of protecting the Vjosa River according to the highest international standards. The ambitious vision to establish the first Wild River National Park by the three NGOs is underpinned by their worldview based on the values of nature conservation and local community engagement. The niche emerged from the movement against hydropower development and the lack of consultation of local communities in Albania. Hence, the bottom-up nature of the Vjosa National Park campaign builds on a participatory approach to river management in Albanian that has not been implemented sufficiently in the past. By challenging the concessions for the hydropower plants in Pocem and Kalivac the environmental NGOs made use of legal tools that are part of the dominant regime in order to enhance the legitimacy of their claim against those hydropower plants. Using available legal tools such as local administrative court procedures or international complaint mechanisms also led to the challenge of regime actors within the existing institutional framework. The use of these legal tools is part of an experimental process of destabilizing the dominant regime and exerting pressure on regime actors such as the government and its sectoral departments and agencies (Castan Broto et al., 2021). Through these institutionalized forms of pressuring the dominant regime precedents are created that can be utilized by the expanding network of niche actors. The complaint mechanism of the Bern Convention was successful in the cases of the hydropower plants in Pocem and Kalivac. However, in the case of the Vlora airport, this legal tool did not have the desired effect. The desired change in the social dimension of Albanian river management relates to a democratization of the decision-making process, enhanced transparency, and public participation.

Next to legal tools, the niche actors were using scientific knowledge and experts to underpin their vision of the Vjosa National Park. The agency of scientific experts helped to provide legitimacy for the vision of the National Park not only for challenging governmental decisions on the Vjosa River but also to gain the attention of the wider nature conservation community including the IUCN. Moreover, through the scientific advice provided by the IUCN, a social learning process was induced related to necessary reforms to guide the implementation of the first Wild River National Park. One example of the proposed institutional reforms is the establishment of a Regional Agency for Protected Areas (RAPA) that is aimed at improving the efficient management of the Vjosa National Park across local administrative units (IUCN, MoTE, & Patagonia, 2021). The involvement of Patagonia as an international donor with a wide international network was essential for the breakthrough of this niche innovation as it provided financial resources for the campaign and expanded the international support for their demands. The desired change for Albanian river management relates to the proper enforcement of the protected area status while also taking decisions on the Vjosa National Park that are informed by scientific knowledge.

On the European level, an anti-dam movement emerged in the 1990s, which challenged the paradigm of hydropower development with a lot of dam projects being canceled due to environmental protests (Flamino, 2021). This movement led to the establishment of environmental NGOs such as RiverWatch, which highlight the environmental impacts of hydraulic infrastructure and promote a paradigm shift away from technical solutions in water management. Even though the anti-dam movement became successful in Western Europe, a spill over to the Balkans only occurred in the beginning of the 2000s parallelly to a boom in hydropower development (Flamino, 2021). Therefore, these dynamics were clashing on the European level and picked up with the EU candidacy status of Balkan states such as Albania. These niche developments at the European level, however, are still obstructed by the inclusion of hydropower as a renewable energy source, which encouraged Balkan states to continue their investments in large dams³⁰. Moreover, the financial support from different European development banks was only discontinued recently when NGOs highlighted the problematic role of these investments in terms of blocking the pursuit of alternative renewable energy sources in the Balkans (EuroNatur & RiverWatch, 2022). Dam projects are often framed to contribute to energy security, economic development, and modernization, which conflicts with the conservation of important riverine habitats and the increasing valuation of free-

³⁰ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, May 23rd, 2023.

flowing rivers (Flamino, 2021). Hence, a conflict between the paradigm of technology and engineering-based river management and river conservation in Albania and the rest of the Balkans is on the rise.

The involvement of different groups of outsiders outlined by Fischer and Newig (2016) was successful to accelerate the transition in Albanian river management. Scientists informed the declaration of the Vjosa Wild River National Park by producing a feasibility study integrating this new type of national park into the IUCN framework of Protected Areas (IUCN, MoTE, & Patagonia, 2022). They also closed the existing data gap on endemic and endangered flora and fauna occurring in the Vjosa River, which established the foundation to design a suitable management approach. Moreover, firms such as Patagonia provided financial support and mobilized their international network to increase media attention. The use of video graphics materials such as the “Vjosa Forever” short film are innovative tools to introduce the international audience to the Vjosa case and to portray the cultural value of the river for local communities. The social pressure groups including environmental NGOs and local communities mobilized public support for the Vjosa National Park and also targeted regime actors to cooperate such as the Ministry of Environment and Tourism. Lobbying and protests in different forms are common tools used by niche actors, which were pursued by the coalition of NGOs (Seyfang et al., 2010). Hence, favorable conditions for a transition in Albanian river management are breaking through from the niche level.

All in all, the three conditions for a transition process, namely, “(a) niche-innovations build up internal momentum, (b) changes at the landscape level create pressure on the regime, and (c) destabilization of the regime creates windows of opportunity for niche innovations” (Geels, 2011, p. 29)” were met. The momentum within the niche was created when international actors such as Patagonia and the IUCN got involved, followed by the expansion of the European anti-dam movement that focuses on the Balkan rivers with RiverWatch and EuroNatur being some of the advocates of this movement. Moreover, the ongoing state-building and reform process in Albania created internal pressure on the existing river management regime while external landscape developments related to the EU level embed the transition process. The opening of EU accession negotiations coupled with the international attention generated by the involvement of Patagonia created a window of opportunity for the National Park.

8.1.2. Regime Level

The river management regime in Albania is build around hydraulic infrastructure as Albania is following a Western development pathway since the fall of the Communist regime. This regime is centered around economic and rural development by exploiting Albania’s natural resources including rivers for electricity generation without taking environmental and social impacts into consideration. As an environmental movement around the Vjosa River only emerged slowly within the last ten years, a lack of attention for environmental issues related to river management led to weak institutional capacity to comply with international and EU environmental standards. Challenges the current river management regime is currently facing include water quality due to urban waste and agricultural pollution, which are some of the side effects of upscaling economic development (Miho et al., 2018). The main regime actors include the government, its departments, and agencies. Those actors contain the main decision-making power and agency to influence the regime configuration in a top-down process. Moreover, hydropower companies were also integrated within the dominant energy regime. Concessions for newly planned hydropower dams on the Vjosa River were granted without meeting the requirements for sound Environmental Impact Assessments and public consultation, which has become a widespread practice in most Balkan states that have been in transition to participatory democracy (Miho et al., 2018). As the democratization and state-building processes are continuing in Albania, the reliance on hydropower as the main energy source is challenged by environmental movements that advocate for a diversification of the Albanian energy mix due to the adverse environmental and social impacts of hydropower. Moreover, corruption related to EIAs and the lack of transparency in terms of decisions on the Vjosa River has triggered reforms from the EU level (Williams & Dupuy, 2017).

On the national level, the dynamics among regime and niche actors were characterized by resistance to change in terms of supporting the Vjosa National Park campaign. This is mainly due to the prioritization

of energy demands and economic development over environmental protection. Moreover, the development of tourism opportunities in rural areas of the Vjosa Valley is also connected to the Western growth narrative that is supported by EU accession funding, foreign investments in the Albanian energy sector, and Rural Development Programs. The literature reaffirms the findings of the interviews that “there is a tendency for regime actors to become transition opponents” (Fischer & Newig, 2016, p. 475), which especially relates to the initial governmental opposition to the National Park campaign. However, the benefits of the Vjosa National Park status have also become more appealing to the government’s vision to increase tourism through the international attention the campaign generated. Receiving foreign investment from Patagonia to support the implementation of the management scheme for the National Park constituted another incentive for the government to build institutional capacity. Moreover, to ensure re-election, the government also has to take into account public opinion (Fischer & Newig, 2016), which has been shifting away from support for hydropower development towards 80 percent of the Albanian population being in favor of establishing a Vjosa National Park³¹.

On the Basin level, there is support for promoting rural development and increasing agricultural production, which is competing with energy generation from hydropower. Hence, the water-energy-food nexus needs to be integrated at the local level within the spatial planning of local authorities tailoring the national policies to the local context. Farmers make up a majority of the rural population and would be negatively impacted by the competing water demand from hydropower generation, which would reduce water availability for irrigation. Hence, farmers support the current water management regime that favors water use for irrigation. However, in order to implement the highest protection standard for the Vjosa River, restrictions are expected for water users leading to changes in the configuration of the current river management regime. According to a member of EURACTIVE³², in the recent local elections, the Vjosa National Park did not play a significant role, however, mayors from several municipalities have advocated for the establishment of the park in an open letter to the government. The main priorities at the Basin level concern increasing people’s livelihoods in order to create perspectives for the young generation in the Vjosa Valley. The National Park would create jobs in the area and low-impact tourism is slowly expanding, providing opportunities for revenue to continue the growth-oriented vision for the region (Branko et al., 2022). The changes in the local river management regime are mainly induced by outsiders, which are advocating for radical changes instead of incremental ones that are desired by regime actors (Fischer & Newig, 2016).

8.1.3. Landscape Level

The landscape level has traditionally been defined as being a space with little agency (Geels, 2011), however, this perception is slowly changing as actor classifications can lead to broader definitions of agency that is also found on the landscape level (Newig & Fischer, 2016). Landscape developments include demographics, economic developments, external events, or public opinion that can exert pressure on the dominant regime.

In the Albanian context, several landscape developments are occurring parallelly and are also interconnected. The process of Europeanisation has been ongoing since the fall of the Communist regime and has led to reforms related to environmental protection (Fagan & Sircair, 2010). However, effective environmental governance to protect Albanian rivers was inhibited by factors relating to the Albanian democratization process. Fagan and Sircair (2010) highlight that “problems with state capacity are exacerbated by contested jurisdiction, disputed legitimacy and fractured accountability of decision-making and enforcement” (p. 809). Those factors are common traits among Balkan states in transition to democracy and are impacting their ability to enforce environmental legislation related to river governance. The competition among the Democratic and Socialist Parties of Albania resulted in election boycotts and political contestation negatively impacting the development of state capacity at the national level. Therefore, structural problems related to landscape developments embed the conflicts among regime and

³¹ Personal communication, EURACTIVE interviewee, May 9th, 2023.

³² Personal communication, EURACTIVE interviewee, May 9th, 2023.

niche actors. One of these conflicts concerns environmental NGOs advocating for compliance with environmental standards while the government is focused on economic growth as a tool to increase state capacity. Despite these conflicts, Albania is currently in a breakthrough phase where significant economic, social, and institutional changes become visible and processes of social learning are informed by EU standards, scientific knowledge, and bottom-up environmental movements (Rotmans et al., 2001). However, historical continuities from the Communist regime are still lingering within institutional structures related to corruption and compliance (Williams & Dupuy, 2017), which triggered reforms on the state level but also in civil society.

Economic prosperity is one determinant of the emergence of social movements that increase pressure on regime actors to enhance participatory democracy (Fagan & Sircair, 2010). The economic prosperity of the Albanian population was hampered by the collapse of the economy in 1997 leading to low GDP growth, which prevented citizens from participating in political processes as they are struggling to sustain their daily livelihoods. This reinforced the slow development of environmental movements as “ecological problems, sympathy for a particular cause amongst the population, or political opportunities alone will not result in the emergence of efficacious organisations” (Fagan & Sircair, p. 810). Moreover, due to the stagnating economy, especially young Albanians, the middle class, and academics have left the rural areas of the Vjosa Valley or emigrated to countries with better economic prospects (Cullhaj, 2016). Hence, urbanization and the Albanian diaspora reinforced the unfavorable conditions related to the development of an engaged civil society that supports environmental movements such as the Vjosa National Park campaign. However, the process of European integration created opportunities to foster a sustainable economic and political transition in Albania by providing EU accession and structural funds within a Green Deal for the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2020b). Therefore, agency exists on the European level to assist the macro-economic development of the Balkan region based on the principles of the European Green Deal. Integrating environmental protection into the economic and social transition of Albania increases prospects for transformative change in Albanian river management.

8.2. Reparative Innovation

This section examines the transition process in Albanian river management induced by the Vjosa National Park as an innovative legal tool to address socio-political inequalities. In order to answer the sub-question **“To what extent does the declaration of the Wild River National Park qualify as a reparative innovation leading to transformative change in Albanian river management?”**, the concept of reparative innovation is employed to highlight how a Wild River National Park can address historical continuities. Reparative innovations have the potential to disrupt the existing regime and break away from the current narrative underpinning the dominant regime. Castan Broto et al. (2021) highlight that “niche innovations can only be radical enough if driven by disruptive innovations that hold power to overthrow unsustainable socio-technical regimes” (p. 210), hence, this section showcases how the Vjosa National Park can provide an alternative narrative for Albanian river management.

The process of experimentation is one element that characterizes an emerging reparative innovation as it aims to depart from existing unsustainable practices (Castan Broto et al., 2021). Even though National Parks are a common practice to conserve ecosystems, their scope has been restricted to specific habitats in which endangered flora and fauna occurs. The international standards for Protected Areas were designed by the IUCN and specify suitable management practices that can be tailored to specific types of Protected Areas. The National Parks category II is defined as “large natural or near-natural areas protecting large-scale ecological processes with characteristic species and ecosystems, which also have environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities” (Dudley, 2008, p. 2). The Vjosa National Park constitutes the first Wild River National Park encompassing the entire course of the river with the goal to preserve its free-flowing state. Hence, building hydropower plants is now prohibited within the borders of the new National Park. However, other infrastructure projects such as the Vlora airport were not canceled yet. This is due to the incremental process of establishing the National Park as, within the first phase, only the active river channel is under protection (IUCN, MoTE, & Patagonia, 2022). In the second phase, the Wild River National Park is intended to

include the floodplains and tributaries of the Vjosa River in order to ensure the integrity of the whole ecosystem due to its mosaic of habitats (Sovinc, 2021). Including the floodplains also integrates human settlements along the river and aims to foster a balance between the natural and social aspects related to the Vjosa River. Using a step-by-step approach gives the government time strengthening institutional capacity to manage such a big area and to educate the local communities how the National Park status is impacting their daily lives. Building institutional capacity mainly concerns providing financial resources, training staff to execute daily tasks, establishing visitor infrastructure such as visitor centers, and coordinating responsibilities among state authorities (Sovinc, 2021). In order to strengthen regional capacity, establishing a RAPA for the Vjosa River was recommended by the IUCN in order to administer the whole Vjosa National Park (IUCN, MoTE, & Patagonia, 2022). It is aimed to become an independent institution from the government to avoid structural problems associated with the current institutional design of protected areas management. Through the involvement of the IUCN as an outside actor, expert knowledge guides the alignment of the Vjosa National Park with international standards while still allowing room for a social learning process to occur that is tailored to the Albanian context. Hence, the establishment of the National Park is based on an experimental process, which goes beyond existing practices.

The experimental process of establishing the National Park is underpinned by the visions of different stakeholders but also by the creation of a new narrative around re-envisioning infrastructure. For the Vjosa River, a clear shift away from the dominant regime of hydraulic infrastructure for energy production is becoming evident (Flamino, 2021). The ban on hydropower development on the Vjosa River is one indication for this shift but also pilot projects such as “Solar in Kute” led by EcoAlbania show that a holistic approach toward providing alternatives for Albanian energy generation and climate adaptation is on the rise. It also shows the local population’s willingness to become part of the process of experimentation and be more active in shaping the future of the Vjosa Valley. According to Castan Broto et al. (2021) “through experimentation with those landscapes, a wide range of adaptation possibilities emerges, linked in every case to situated perceptions of a place and its history” (p. 212). Re-envisioning infrastructure in the Vjosa Valley provides opportunities for local communities to tailor infrastructure development to their specific needs and to the standards related to the National Park. The opposition by NGOs against the Vlora airport is underpinned by their vision for sustainable tourism development departing from the mass-tourism-oriented regime, which led to an expansion of tourism infrastructure in many Balkan states (Porfino, 2020). Achieving a human-nature balance with the Wild River National Park is one new narrative that is emerging in the transition around the Vjosa River.

The participatory process of collectively re-envisioning the existing regime configuration is institutionalized in the Stakeholder Engagement Process related to the National Park. It aims to integrate local knowledge into decisions on the Vjosa River (Sovinc, 2021). Moreover, repairing relational harm between the government and civil society is one main goal of this innovative practice as distrust in government authority stems from the Communist regime. However, this distrust was reinforced through corruption and a lack of participation in river management. According to Figueroa et al. (2010), participation is one important element to reconcile the state and civil society in order to heal intergenerational harm caused by the Communist regime. In the Vjosa case, reparative environmental justice and democratization go hand in hand as stakeholder participation in river management leads to more environmental awareness. A reconciliation among different water demands can also be integrated within the process of establishing the National Park. The current distribution of water uses led to conflicts between local irrigation needs and foreign hydropower companies with concessions to export energy to Italy and Turkey. Determining fair water distribution within the river management regime is part of reconfiguring justice as it attributes benefits and burdens to social groups as well as to the environment (Castan Broto et al., 2021). Hence, the National Park provides an opportunity to reconfigure environmental justice for Albanian river management.

Tourism has become one central issue around the National Park as it can lead to different pathways of development for the Vjosa Valley and determines the stress that can be expected on the Vjosa River. Two conflicting visions exist among stakeholders on how to integrate tourism into the management of the

National Park. The first one is mostly promoted by the government, which wants to use the investment opportunities created by the Vjosa National Park for rural development and employment in the region. An indication of a mass-tourism approach is the Vlora airport in the Protected Area of the Vjosa Narta Lagoon, which would compromise the protection of the Vjosa Delta (Council of Europe, 2023). Moreover, a lack of transparency and insufficient Environmental Impact Assessments prevail related to the airport reinforcing the distrust in the government's political commitments. By following a Western growth narrative, tourism development can reinforce the existing social and environmental inequalities that are aimed to be repaired through the National Park. However, by continuing this narrative, unsustainable practices and relational harm remain. An alternative narrative advocated for by the National Park campaign relates to a slow and controlled development of eco- and agrotourism practices that are directed at making the natural heritage of the Vjosa River accessible. It also contributes to enhancing the environmental awareness of visitors to not disturb the riverine ecosystem. The cultural practices and emotional connection of local communities, which have prevailed for generations, are embraced in a transboundary Eco-Museum of the Aaos and Vjosa natural heritage (Sorotou, 2014). It enables local communities to share the role of the Vjosa River in shaping their culture and is one way to reconcile the human and environmental dimensions of river management.

The ongoing process of Europeanization can be considered a departure from Albania's Communist past of isolation and comes with new narratives for river management but also for the Albanian society. Consistency in delivering on political commitments is an important step in repairing the distrust in state authority within the Albanian population (Almassi, 2022). Controversial decisions such as the construction of the Vlora airport fueled doubts about the trustworthiness of the political commitments to protect the Vjosa River by the Albanian government. Moreover, members of EcoAlbania and EuroNatur³³ mentioned the lack of government support throughout the National Park campaign when only the involvement of outside actors such as Patagonia led to the declaration of the National Park. The international media assumed a watchdog function on behalf of civil society in order to pressure the government to keep its political commitments³⁴. Hence, outsiders had a considerable role in steering the transition in Albanian river management, which shows how socio-political inequalities inhibited change from the national and local levels. Hence, new visions departing from the current regime were necessary to promote change. The EU accession process attributed to the European level comes with considerable leverage as the enforcement of environmental norms is expected to become essential when the Chapter on the environment is under screening by the European Commission³⁵. For Montenegro, for example, the restoration of the Ulcinj Salina wetland became a condition for the approval of the environmental chapter within the EU accession process³⁶. Other elements such as sound EIAs and enhanced transparency are fostered by EU legislation and can be integrated into the reconciliation process between the Albanian government and civil society in order to create trust in institutional processes. The use of legal tools such as court procedures or international complaint mechanisms against harmful infrastructure projects evoked resistance by local communities and reduced power inequalities between the state and civil society in Albania. Environmental movements mobilized civil society to challenge the role of hydropower in the future of Albanian energy policy and the commercialization of natural heritage. Therefore, strengthening participation in river management and empowering citizens to hold the government accountable for environmental harm are important elements in repairing inequalities among social groups affected by decisions on the Vjosa River.

All in all, elements of reparative innovations are present in the case of the Vjosa Wild River National Park that contribute to repairing social but also environmental harm. A reconfiguration of environmental justice underpinning the current river management regime is currently being experimented with by designing a suitable management scheme for the Vjosa National Park. This new management scheme

³³ Personal communication, EcoAlbania interviewee, March 29th, 2023, Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, April 13th 2023.

³⁴ Personal communication, EURACTIVE interviewee, May 9th, 2023.

³⁵ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, May 23rd, 2023.

³⁶ Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, May 23rd, 2023.

focuses on balancing local communities' needs with the objectives of the National Park. Important steps to achieve this balance are pursuing eco-tourism instead of mass tourism, shifting to alternative renewable energy sources, re-envisioning infrastructure, proper enforcement of EU environmental legislation, and enhanced participation to empower civil society and restore trust in governmental authorities. Reparative environmental justice considerations were underpinning the transformative change in Albanian river management by re-imagining narratives of Western economic growth and tackling continuities from Albania's Communist past.

9. Discussion

This section critically discusses the analytical findings and reflects on their relation to the concept of legal personhood in order to answer the sub-question **“What are the prospects of the Wild River National Park to steer Albanian river management towards a rights-based approach?”**. It embeds the declaration of the Vjosa National Park into the academic debate on legal personhood and outlines to what extent the transition in Albanian river management could lead to conferring legal personhood on the Vjosa River. It also outlines the contributions of this research to the academic field of transition theory by filling the gaps related to the role of legal innovations and the agency of landscape actors. Moreover, the limitations of this research regarding the use of methods and analytical approaches are reflected on. Finally, recommendations for future research are provided to showcase how the remaining gaps in this research can be filled.

9.1. From National Park to Legal Personhood

The new Wild River National Park has shown to address historical inequalities and empower local communities to participate in the decision-making process on the Vjosa River. Therefore, it qualifies as a reparative innovation that induces changes in Albanian river management as it serves as a blueprint that could be replicated for other free-flowing rivers in the Balkans. The National Park campaign made use of available legal tools such as court procedures and international complaint mechanisms in order to destabilize the existing regime through bottom-up resistance against hydropower development and harmful construction projects. The use of legal tools coupled with scientific evidence created legitimacy for the desired changes and underpin the new narrative forwarded by the National Park campaign. Moreover, the uptake of the Wild River National Park as a new legal category within the IUCN Protected Areas framework symbolizes a successful breakthrough of this niche innovation. Based on this uptake and the dynamics from the European level pushing for institutional reforms in river management, the prospects for transformative change in Albanian river management are favorable.

Despite the favorable conditions for a transition, interviewees by EuroNatur and EcoAlbania³⁷ indicated that the concept of legal personhood has not been explored for the Vjosa River yet. A member of EcoAlbania³⁸ highlighted the conceptual difficulty that “the river is just not one element, it is an ecosystem and it's very dynamic. So even if it has some rights, there are a huge number of ecosystems of species that live within the river”. These conceptual difficulties relate to the scope and boundaries of river rights that have to be tailored to a country's legal tradition. A rights-based approach needs to be established on a suitable legal base or requires a constitutional court to interpret existing legal norms to allow for institutionalization (Eckstein et al., 2019). The process of Europeanization of the Albanian legal system and environmental law added a volatility to the legal system as EU norms have been adopted and institutional reforms are driven by the ongoing process of democratization. These dynamics make it difficult to establish legal personhood in a constantly changing legal system. As legal procedures have been most successful for the National Park campaign, a conferral of river rights through a court ruling has the most prospects in the Albanian legal system. The administrative court in Tirana already extended existing environmental law and created a precedent for environmental movements through the rulings against the

³⁷ Personal communication, EcoAlbania interviewee, March 29th, 2023, Personal communication, EuroNatur interviewee, April 13th, 2023.

³⁸ Personal communication, EcoAlbania interviewee, March 29th

hydropower plants in Kalivac and Pocem. The volatility of legal norms in Albania, therefore, leaves room for experimentation and the integration of innovative legal approaches for river management.

Similarities exist among the Wild River National Park and a rights-based approach to river governance, which are mainly related to the desired change that is intended. In practice, the environmental NGOs protected the integrity of the Vjosa's riverine ecosystem in court. On behalf of the local communities affected by the hydropower dams, the NGOs were granted legal standing in court representing the interests of the river and its communities. The NGOs also highlighted the strong local sense of connection to the river through traditional practices and the cultural value of the river (Patagonia, 2021), which is similar to the cultural and recreational value of nature in the case of the Mar Menor in Spain. By simultaneously representing local communities' interests and the river's interests related to the integrity of its ecosystem, the NGOs paved the way for legally enshrining a human nature balance within the Wild River National Park concept. It also extended the current IUCN framework of Protected Areas by providing a blueprint that can be replicated for other free-flowing rivers. This new category can be considered as a legal innovation that accounts for the unique characteristics of riverine ecosystems, which require the connectivity of the whole river instead of protecting individual habitats. Protecting the integrity of the riverine ecosystem through legal personhood also occurred in the case of the Whanganui River in New Zealand where the river was recognized to be an "indivisible and living whole, comprising the Whanganui River from the mountains to the sea, [and] incorporating all its physical and metaphysical elements" (Te Awa Tupua Act, 2017). Therefore, the Wild River National Park is intended to pursue the same desired outcome related to a holistic protection of the river as in the case of the Whanganui River. The campaign also achieved their goal of giving the Vjosa River a voice in policy debates by challenging government decisions negatively impacting the river and its local communities, which is one desired effect of the legal personhood concept as well (Wilk et al., 2019).

The practical difficulties of defining legal personhood for the Albanian legal system are avoided by extending the existing framework for Protected Areas and tailoring it to the Albanian post-Soviet context. Hence, it prevents a controversy surrounding the legal base and scope of defining river rights that has been present in most of the cases of the rights of nature (Clark et al., 2019). It is still uncertain how compatible such a new approach is with the EU *acquis* as limited cases of legal personhood exist in EU Member States. In most cases of rights of nature, a community-based management approach is chosen (Iorns et al., 2018), however, in the case of the Vjosa River, the management scheme is exploring two possible options. Either an independent agency that has similarities to the RAPA is set up or a state managed Vjosa Wild River National Park is established as a state company (IUCN, MoTE, & Patagonia, 2022). Local communities are mostly involved in the planning phase through the Stakeholder Engagement Process, but the day-to-day management is attributed to a mix of government actors assisted by scientific advisors. Therefore, local communities are not as involved in the Wild River National Park management compared to a rights-based approach, which resulted in local communities representing the interests of a river as a guardian. However, in the feasibility study on the National Park highlights that "activities that provide spiritual, scientific, educational, and recreational opportunities are allowed and encouraged" (IUCN, MoTE, & Patagonia, 2022, p. 82), integrating stakeholders' different interests for the use of the Vjosa River. A holistic management approach is currently developed, which also requires legal changes and allows for innovative practices that are tailored to the Albanian context. Despite the uncertainties attributed with the processes of Europeanization and democratization in Albania, focusing on the enforcement of existing environmental standards and implementing the new type of National Park establishes a promising foundation for a conferral of legal personhood to the Vjosa River in the future.

9. 2. Contributions to Transition Theory

This research has applied established concepts of transition theory to this emerging transition in Albanian river management. It has also applied the novel concept of reparative innovations in the field of river management and has shown how this concept can be applied to an exploratory case study. As the reparative innovation of the new type of National Park comes with legal implications, the application of this concept raised questions on the role of legal innovations in a transition. After the application of

transition theory to this case, some divergence in the role of landscape actors to the academic debate in transition theory has been found.

The role of legal innovations in transition theory remains underdeveloped, however, Soininen et al. (2021) refer to legal steering as an important driver in a transition. Legal steering refers to legal instruments steering “the direction of societal change for sustainability through, e.g., goals, monitoring criteria and timetables at different levels of law from global to local“ (Soininen et al., 2021, p. 72). Therefore, the role of legal innovations, in this case, the new type of National Park, can induce an acceleration of the ongoing transition by overcoming institutional barriers, embracing new technologies and by connecting science and policy (Soininen et al., 2021). The role of scientific experts was strengthened throughout the National Park campaign and is providing legitimacy for the Wild River National Park. The Wild River National Park is a new legal instrument to steer the Albanian river management regime towards higher levels of environmental protection and nature conservation. The narrative underpinning the Wild River National Park is based on a reconciliation of human needs and the conservation of the riverine ecosystem, which integrates a human-nature balance into the Albanian river management regime. The new narrative underpinning the National Park of conserving nature for its intrinsic value and cultural value for local communities, challenges the Western growth narrative of exploiting natural resources for human interests. It provides guidance for future decisions on the Vjosa River relating to sustainable tourism and rural development by only allowing for small-scale and sustainable uses of the river’s natural resources.

In contrast to the assumption by most transition literature (Newig & Fischer, 2016, Geels, 2011), landscape actors were not passive outsiders but possessed considerable leverage. The IUCN as a stakeholder and its standards for Protected Areas emerged on the landscape level and resulted in significant agency from landscape actors to steer the transition on the regime level. The support for a new type of National Park originated at the niche level and was picked up by landscape actors to destabilize the current regime of Albanian river management. EU institutions, which were categorized as landscape actors, involved in the process of EU accession, also exerted significant pressure on the Albanian government to comply with environmental standards and advocated for the establishment of the new type of National Park. Therefore, leverage exists on the European level in terms of steering the transition in Albanian river management by using financial means such as EU accession assistance or by using environmental compliance as an accession condition during the screening process of the EU acquis. Patagonia as an international donor acting on the landscape level provided considerable financial resources and generated media attention while channeling the support from the landscape level for the network of niche actors. Moreover, the combination of pressure from the landscape level and new visions and narratives from the niche level underpinning the National Park as a legal innovation led to the acceleration of the transition. Therefore, in this case significant agency has been found at the landscape level coupled with legal steering of the transition through the legal instrument of the Wild River National Park.

9.3. Limitations of this Research

This exploratory research has applied new concepts from transition theory to a case with peculiar contextual factors. Therefore, several limitations occurred throughout the research process.

The use of transition theory to examine the developments at the niche, regime and landscapes levels coupled with the three units of analysis of the European, National and Basin levels led to complex dynamics among those different levels and made it difficult to estimate long-term effects and feedbacks. Even though this research has studied the Albanian case in-depth, the dynamics of Europeanization, democratization and transition processes were difficult to distinguish as they were intertwined. The Europeanization process makes future developments in Albanian river management more stable and predictable as an approximation to EU norms is currently pursued. The prospects of conferring legal personhood to the Vjosa River depend on the success of the Wild River National Park and the level of environmental protection that comes with the implementation of the National Park management scheme. As legal personhood is mostly applied in cases where environmental protection was not sufficiently ensured by environmental law (Clark et al., 2019), the compliance with the new Wild River National Park standards is going to play a significant role to determine whether a rights-based approach could be the

next step. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether Albania can improve its enforcement of environmental law or if legal personhood would be a more effective alternative for ensuring the environmental protection of the Vjosa River.

The methodological approach that was taken for this research fits with the recent developments of the case, which only allowed for an exploratory design as the long-term effects are not quantifiable yet. In order to better understand the developments at the Basin level, fieldwork would have enhanced the findings of the semi-structured interviews by talking to local authorities and communities within a local context, however, this was out of the scope of this research. Moreover, the language barrier constituted one limitation to interview Albanian stakeholders as especially the rural population does not speak English and would require interpreter services. Similar limitations apply for the access and study of documents by local authorities as a lot of municipalities do not have policy documents available on their websites or only have scanned documents available that cannot be translated via online translation services. The lack of internet presence of some stakeholders such as the National Water Council and the River Basin Council of the Vjosa River restricted insights into two major stakeholder perceptions within the stakeholder analysis. As the River Basin Management Plan for the Vjosa is still in development, valuable additional information on the implementation of the Water Framework Directive in Albania was missing. Therefore, the level of integration among the river management objectives for the Vjosa River and its National Park status can only be studied once both management schemes are finalized. Despite the lack of access to local documents and fieldwork in Albania, this thesis has generated results on the three different levels but went more in depth for the European and National levels. This was accounted for in the explorative research design and was facilitated by the iterative approach employed in the stakeholder analysis and the semi-structured interviews.

10. Conclusion

This research has studied the transition in Albanian river management induced by the Vjosa Wild River National Park. It addressed the research question **“Which lessons can be drawn from the case study of the Vjosa River about a transition in Albanian river governance?”** by using an exploratory case study design. Several lessons from this case study were identified.

Firstly, a shift in the political discourse on the Vjosa River was observed. The initial controversy surrounding hydropower development on the Vjosa River among grassroots movement and the Albanian government evolved into a more cooperative discourse. The niche vision of the Vjosa National campaign was taken up by the government and was integrated into the current river management regime in Albania. However, challenges related to tourism and rural development are proliferated due to the ongoing conflict on the Vlora airport. Secondly, the reconciliation among different stakeholders and their interests is facilitated by the Stakeholder Engagement Process on the development of a management scheme of the National Park. This process promotes participatory democracy within Albanian river management and enhances public participation in decisions on the Vjosa River. Thirdly, the Vjosa Wild River National Park as a niche innovation had a breakthrough when outside actors were mobilized by the network of niche actors. Finally, the new type of National Park was found to qualify as a reparative innovation that addresses historical inequalities among stakeholders, the state and civil society. Therefore, the National Park makes an important contribution to the ongoing democratization process in Albania by highlighting deficits in the enforcement of environmental law.

The transition in Albanian river management was driven by legal innovations from the niche level, which were supported by outside actors operating on the landscape level. These actors were using their agency by providing financial support and generating international attention for the campaign. This fostered the diffusion of niche visions and a reconfiguration of the current Western growth narrative underpinning the dominant regime of Albanian river management. Hence, a new narrative focusing on nature conservation based on the intrinsic value of free-flowing rivers and their cultural value for local communities was advocated for by niche actors. Scientists played an important role in generating scientific knowledge on the Vjosa River and integrating it into the decisions taken on the river. Together with the inclusion of local knowledge within the Stakeholder Engagement Process, legitimacy was created for the legal

innovation of the Wild River National Park. Landscape developments related to the process of Europeanization and democratization promoted reforms in Albanian river management and led to the destabilization of the current regime. The departure from the Western growth paradigm is a major contribution to addressing structural problems from Albania's Communist past related to corruption and weak state capacity. Therefore, fulfilling the political commitment by the government to properly enforce the National Park status would re-establish trust in government authority.

Even though a rights-based approach has not been explored in Albanian river management yet, which is partly due to the low salience of environmental issues in the past, a reconfiguration of environmental justice was experimented with through the new type of National Park. The Wild River National Park status legally enshrines a human nature balance by still allowing for sustainable uses of the river but restricting the exploitation of the river for its natural resources. Several elements of a rights-based approach are present in the Wild River National Park, however, the success of the management scheme determines whether additional steps need to be taken to ensure environmental protection of the Vjosa River. The legal personhood approach provides an alternative to environmental law in cases, where proper enforcement is absent or deficient. Therefore, the National Park status provides a promising foundation for a future conferral of legal personhood to the Vjosa River.

Through the application of new concepts, this research identified some gaps that could be filled by future research. The concept of reparative innovations enriched this analysis by adding a reparative justice dimension to transition theory to study river management. However, the concept was applied to a post-Soviet context for the first time, which comes with unique conceptual challenges. Therefore, it needs to be applied to other cases with these historical characteristics to allow for generalization. Consequently, other Balkan states such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro with free-flowing rivers could serve as potential case studies as most of them are still in transition to democracy and are EU candidate states. More case studies using the concept of reparative innovation would also help to identify more criteria and solutions for how to address historical continuities in a post-Soviet context. Moreover, the debate within transition theory about the role of legal innovations requires more attention as legal steering can be an important driver of a transition because the integration of legal innovations requires support from regime actors. Therefore, future research in the field of transition theory could be enriched by focusing on the legal implications of niche innovations in order to take a more holistic approach.

References

- Almassi, B. (2022). *Reparative Environmental Justice in a World of Wounds*. Lexington Books.
- Baraj E. et al., (2017). Assessment of Water Monitoring System in Albania under the Perspective of EU Legislation and Austrian Practice. *Albanian Journal of Agricultural Sciences*, 155-164. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/assessment-water-monitoring-system-albania-under/docview/2013181273/se-2>.
- Blázquez, L., García, J. A. & Bodoque, J. M. (2021). Stakeholder Analysis: Mapping the River Networks for Integrated Flood Risk management. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 124, 506–516. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2021.07.024>
- Bloesch, J. & Sieber, U. (2002). The Morphological Destruction and Subsequent Restoration Programmes of Large Rivers in Europe. *SIL Proceedings, 1922-2010*, 28(2), 750–753. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03680770.2001.11901814>
- Borràs, S. (2016). New Transitions from Human Rights to the Environment to the Rights of Nature. *Transnational Environmental Law*, 5(1), 113–143. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s204710251500028x>
- Branko, I. (2022). Vjosa River Valley; Strategies for Sustainable Tourism. In *Springer eBooks* (331–343). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-74482-3_26
- Brugge, R. V. D. & Rotmans, J. (2006). Towards Transition Management of European Water Resources. *Water Resources Management*, 21(1), 249–267. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11269-006-9052-0>
- Bryman, A. (2021). *Social Research Methods* (6th Revised). Oxford University Press.
- Castan Broto, V., Westman, L. & Huang, P. (2021). Reparative Innovation for Urban Climate Adaptation. *Journal of the British Academy*, 205–218. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009s9.205>
- Clark, C., Emmanouil, N., Page, J. T. & Pelizzon, A. (2019). Can You Hear the Rivers Sing? Legal Personhood, Ontology, and the Nitty-Gritty of Governance. *Ecology Law Quarterly*, 45(4), 787–844. <https://doi.org/10.15779/z388s4jp7m>
- Comino, E., Bottero, M., Pomarico, S. & Rosso, M. (2016). The Combined Use of Spatial Multicriteria Evaluation and Stakeholders Analysis for Supporting the Ecological Planning of a River Basin. *Land Use Policy*, 58, 183–195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2016.07.026>
- Cordell, K. (2006). *Ethnicity and Democratisation in the New Europe*. Routledge.
- Council of Europe. (2018). *Recommendation on the Planned Hydro-Power Plant Developments on the Vjosa River (Albania)*. (T-PVS(2018)10). Strasbourg. <https://rm.coe.int/recommendation-on-the-planned-hydro-power-plant-developments-on-the-vj/16808e84ee>
- Council of Europe. (2023). *On-the-spot Appraisal: Possible Impacts of Infrastructure and Urbanisation Developments Particularly Vlora International Airport on the Vjosa-Narta Protected Area*. (T-PVS/Files(2022)67). Strasbourg, <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680ab31d8>
- Cullhaj, F. (2016). *Democratization from Within: Political Culture and the Consolidation of Democracy in Post-Communist Albania*. Edizioni Nuova Cultura.

- Dudley, N. (2008). *Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories*. IUCN. <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/pag-021.pdf>
- Durim, K. (2014). Concessions In The Hydropower Sector In Albania – Challenges And Opportunities, *Studies in Business and Economics*, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Faculty of Economic Sciences, 9(1), pp. 73-80. <https://magazines.ulbsibiu.ro/eccsf/RePEc/blg/journal/917kraja.pdf>
- Eckstein, G., D’Andrea, A., Marshall, V., O’Donnell, E., Talbot-Jones, J., Curran, D., & O’Byrne, K. (2019). Conferring Legal Personality on the World’s Rivers: A Brief Intellectual Assessment. *Water International*, 44(6–7), 804–829. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508060.2019.1631558>
- EcoAlbania. (2019). Media and Environmental Cases in Albania. *EcoAlbania*. <https://ecoalbania.org/en/media-and-environmental-cases-in-albania-2/>
- EcoAlbania. (2021a). *Solar in Kutë Campaign – Eco Albania*. Retrieved on 21st July 2023, <https://ecoalbania.org/fushata-solar-ne-kute/?lang=en>
- EcoAlbania. (2021b). For Understanding and Using Environmental Law in Albania: On the Legal Protection of the Vjosa River. <https://www.ecoalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/EcoAlbania-Practic-Manual-A5-te-drejtat-mjedisore-ENG.pdf>
- EEA. (2018). European Waters — Assessment of Status and Pressures 2018, EEA Report No 7/2018, *European Environment Agency*. <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/state-of-water>
- EJAtlas. (2019). Poçem Hydropower Dam Stopped, Albania | *EJAtlas. Environmental Justice Atlas*. <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/pocem-hydropower-dam-albania>
- EuroNatur. (2015). *Save the Blue Heart of Europe: Balkan Rivers under Attack from Hydropower Lobby*. Retrieved on 4th April 2023, https://ecoalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Blue-Heart_Kampagnenbroschuere_2015_2.pdf
- EuroNatur & RiverWatch. (2018). *Eco-Masterplan for Balkan Rivers*. <https://balkanrivers.net/en/studies/eco-masterplan-for-balkan-rivers>
- EuroNatur & RiverWatch. (2019). *Leonardo DiCaprio raises his voice for Vjosa*. Retrieved on 26th June 2023, <https://balkanrivers.net/en/news/leonardo-dicaprio-raises-his-voice-for-vjosa>
- EuroNatur, RiverWatch & Wetlands International. (2021). Legal Toolkit for Rivers. In *Legal Toolkit for Rivers*. <https://legaltoolkit4rivers.eu/>
- EuroNatur. (2021). *Vjosa Science Week 2021*. Retrieved on 21st June 2023, https://www.euronatur.org/fileadmin/docs/projekte/Balkan_Rivers_Blaues_Herz_Europa/EuroNatur_magazine_3_2021_Science_Busters_englisch.pdf
- EuroNatur & RiverWatch. (2022). *Hydropower Projects on Balkan Rivers: 2022 Update*. <https://balkanrivers.net/en/studies/hydropower-projects-on-balkan-rivers-2022-update>
- EuroNatur. (2023a). *Mission & Mode of Operation - Connecting Nature and People*. Retrieved on 20th June 2023, <https://www.euronatur.org/en/about-euronatur/organization/mission-mode-of-operation>
- EuroNatur. (2023b). *We are Protecting Europe’s Last Free Flowing Rivers*. Retrieved on 20th June 2023, <https://www.euronatur.org/en/what-we-do/river-protection-in-europe>

- European Commission. (2017). *Albania: Support to Water Management*. European Commission. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2017-04/ipa_2016-038718-5_support_to_water_management.pdf
- European Commission. (2020a). *EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030: Bringing Nature Back into our Lives*. (COM(2020) 380 final), Brussels. Retrieved on 21st June 2023, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:a3c806a6-9ab3-11ea-9d2d-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF
- European Commission. (2020b). *Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans*. (SWD(2020) 223 final), Brussels. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-10/green_agenda_for_the_western_balkans_en.pdf
- European Commission. (2022). *Albania 2022 Report*. (SWD(2022) 332 final), Brussels. <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Albania%20Report%202022.pdf>
- European Parliament. (2018). *Albania Report 2018*. (Resolution C 363/146), *Official Journal of the European Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018IP0481&rid=4>
- European Parliament. (2021). *Albania Progress Report 2021*. (SWD(2021) 289 final), Strasbourg. <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-10/Albania-Report-2021.pdf>
- European Parliament. (2022). *Albania Report 2022*. (SWD(2022) 332 final), Brussels. <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Albania%20Report%202022.pdf>
- Fagan, A. & Sircar, I. (2010). Environmental Politics in the Western Balkans: River Basin Management and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Activity in Herzegovina. *Environmental Politics*, 19(5), 808–830. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2010.508313>
- Fischer, L. & Newig, J. (2016). Importance of Actors and Agency in Sustainability Transitions: A Systematic Exploration of the Literature. *Sustainability*, 8(5), 476. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su8050476>
- Flaminio, S. (2021). Modern and Nonmodern Waters: Sociotechnical Controversies, Successful Anti-Dam Movements and Water Ontologies. *Water Alternatives*, 14(1), 204–227. https://serval.unil.ch/resource/serval:BIB_A66BB0B0FEEF.P001/REF.pdf
- Folke, C., Carpenter, S. R., Walker, B. R., Scheffer, M., Elmqvist, T., Gunderson, L. & Holling, C. S. (2004). Regime Shifts, Resilience, and Biodiversity in Ecosystem Management. *Annual Review of Ecology, Evolution, and Systematics*, 35(1), 557–581. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ecolsys.35.021103.105711>
- Forsyth, M., Cleland, D., Tepper, F., Hollingworth, D., Soares, M., Nairn, A. & Wilkinson, C. (2021). A Future Agenda for Environmental Restorative Justice? *The International Journal of Restorative Justice*, 4(1), 17–40. <https://doi.org/10.5553/tijrj.000063>
- Freeman, E. R. (2010). *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach (English Edition)*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fuchs, M. C. (2023). *Rights of Nature Reach Europe: The Mar Menor Case in Spain in the Light of Latin American Precedents*, *VerfBlog*, 2023/2/24, <https://verfassungsblog.de/rights-of-nature-reach-europe/>

- Geels, F. W. (2011). The Multi-Level Perspective on Sustainability Transitions: Responses to Seven Criticisms. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 1(1), 24–40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2011.02.002>
- Gerring, J. (2004). What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good for? *American Political Science Review*, 98(2), 341–354. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055404001182>
- Gilissen, H. K., Suykens, C., Kleinhans, M., van Rijswick, M., & van der Werf, K. (2019). Towards a Rights-Based approach in EU International River Basin Governance? Lessons from the Scheldt and Ems Basins. *Water International*, 44(6–7), 701–718. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508060.2019.1649629>
- Gillham, B. (2000). *Case Study Research Methods (Real World Research)*. Continuum.
- Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature. (2018). Universal Declaration of the Rights of Rivers. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55914fd1e4b01fb0b851a814/t/5fb2a147e72ae9517867f45e/1605542218936/UDRR_Nov+2020+Final.pdf
- Government of Albania. (2022). *Edi Rama's Remarks at Meeting with Mayors of the „100 Villages“ Program* [Press release]. <https://www.kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/programi-100-fshatrat-nje-model-i-rilindjes-rurale/>
- Iorns, C. (2018). From Rights to Responsibilities using Legal Personhood and Guardianship for Rivers. *SSRN Electronic Journal, In ResponsAbility: Law and Governance for Living Well with the Earth*, London & New York: Routledge, 216-239. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3270391>
- Knezović, S. & Zeneli, V. (2018). Europeanization in a Difficult Environment. *Southeastern Europe*, 42 (2), 199–223. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-0401026>
- Knott, E., Rao, A. H., Summers, K. & Teeger, C. (2022). Interviews in the Social Sciences. *Nature Reviews Methods Primers*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-022-00150-6>
- Meulenbroek, P. et al. (2021). The River Vjosa – A Baseline Survey on Biodiversity, Potential Impacts and Legal Framework for Hydropower Development. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4139640>
- Miho, A., Beqiraj, S., Graf, W., & Schiemer, F. (2018). The Vjosa River System in Albania: a Summary of Actual Challenges and Agendas. *Acta ZooBot Austria*, 155(1), 377-385.
- Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. (2015). *National Strategy for Integrated Management of Water Resources*. <http://www.ambu.gov.al/programi-kombetar-sektorial-i-ujit-2/>
- Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. (2022). *Republic of Albania Rural Development Programme 2021-2027*. https://ipard.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Programi-IPARD-III_2021-2027_English.pdf
- Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy. (2018). *National Action Plan for Renewable Resources of Energy in Albania 2018-2020*. <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/ALB181524.pdf>
- Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy. (2019). *National Strategy of the Water Supply and Sewerage Sector*. <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/alb214413.pdf>
- Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy. (2020). *Feasibility Study for an Airport in the South of Albania*. <https://www.infrastruktura.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/EN-FEASIBILITY-STUDY-VIA.pdf>

- Ministry of Tourism and Environment. (2019). *National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development 2019-2023*. <https://turizmi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/National-Tourism-Strategy-2019-2023-EN.pdf>
- Ministry of Tourism and Environment. (2022). *Presumed Negative Impact of Hydro-Power Plant Development on the Vjosa River (Albania)*. Retrieved on 21st June 2023, <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680a5ec1a>
- Mitchell, R. K., Agle, B. R. & Wood, D. J. (1997). Toward a Theory of Stakeholder Identification and Salience: Defining the Principle of who and What Really Counts. *Academy of Management Review*, 22(4), 853–886. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1997.9711022105>
- National Agency of Protected Areas (2023). Vjosa River - National Agency of Protected Areas. National Protected Areas Agency. <https://akzm.gov.al/lumi-vjosa/>
- O'Donnell, E. L. & Talbot-Jones, J. (2018). Creating Legal Rights for Rivers: Lessons from Australia, New Zealand, and India. *Ecology and Society*, 23(1). <https://doi.org/10.5751/es-09854-230107>
- O'Donnell, E. & Macpherson, E. (2019). Voice, Power and Legitimacy: the Role of the Legal Person in River Management in New Zealand, Chile and Australia. *Australian Journal of Water Resources*, 23(1), 35–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13241583.2018.1552545>
- 1% for the Planet. (2022). *1% for the Planet - Homepage*. Accessed on 21st June 2023, <https://onepercentfortheplanet.org/>
- Patagonia. (2021). *Vjosa Forever | Protect Europe's Wild Rivers* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wIoAo6KGrw>
- Patagonia & Baker, M. (2023). *Vjosa National Park - Patagonia*. <https://eu.patagonia.com/gb/en/vjosa-national-park/>
- Porfino, E. (2020). Tourism Development in the Western Balkans: Towards a Common Policy. *Annual Review of Territorial Governance in the Western Balkans*, 2, 2707–9384. <https://doi.org/10.32034/CP-TGWBAR-I02-03>
- Putzer, A., Lambooy, T. E., Jeurissen, R. J. & Kim, E. (2022). Putting the Rights of Nature on the Map. A Quantitative Analysis of Rights of Nature Initiatives across the World. *Journal of Maps*, 18(1), 89–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17445647.2022.2079432>
- Reed, M. S. (2008). Stakeholder Participation for Environmental Management: A Literature Review. *Biological Conservation*, 141(10), 2417–2431. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2008.07.014>
- Reed, M. S., Graves, A., Dandy, N., Posthumus, H., Hubacek, K., Morris, J., Prell, C., Quinn, C. H. & Stringer, L. C. (2009). Who's in and why? A Typology of Stakeholder Analysis Methods for Natural Resource Management. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 90(5), 1933–1949. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2009.01.001>
- RiverWatch. (2023a). *Background* | riverwatch.eu. Accessed on 20th June 2023, <https://riverwatch.eu/en/balkanrivers/background>
- RiverWatch. (2023b). *De-Damming* | riverwatch.eu. Accessed on 20th June 2023, <https://riverwatch.eu/en/dedamming/background>
- Rotmans, J., Kemp, R. & Van Asselt, M. B. (2001). More Evolution than Revolution: Transition Management in Public Policy. *Foresight*, 3(1), 15–31. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14636680110803003>

- Schiemer, F., Beqiraj, S., Drescher, A., Graf, W., Egger, G., Essl, F., Frank, T., Hauer, C., Hohensinner, S., Miho, A., Meulenbroek, P., Paill, W., Schwarz, U. & Vitecek, S. (2020). The Vjosa River Corridor: a Model of Natural Hydro-Morphodynamics and a Hotspot of Highly Threatened Ecosystems of European Significance. *Landscape Ecology*, 35(4), 953–968. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10980-020-00993-y>
- Seyfang, G.; Haxeltine, A.; Hargreaves, T.; Longhurst, N. (2010). Energy and Communities in Transition—Towards a New Research Agenda on Agency and Civil Society in Sustainability Transitions, *CSERGE Working Paper*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228539395_Energy_and_communities_in_transition-towards_a_new_research_agenda_on_agency_and_civil_society_in_sustainability_transitions
- Sorotou, A. (2014). *Aoos/Vjosa-Ecomuseum: Talking About our Place*. Accessed on 21st June 2023, https://www.ecomuseum.eu/uploaded/Ecomuseum/Ecomuseum_Guide_06052014.pdf
- Sovinc, A. (2021). Protection Study of the Vjosa River Valley based on IUCN Protected Area Standards. In *IUCN Library System* (IUCN-2021-011). IUCN. Accessed on 23rd March 2023. <https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/49471>
- Starik, M. (1995). Should Trees have Managerial Standing? Toward Stakeholder Status for Non-human Nature. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 14(3), 207–217. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00881435>
- Stone, C. (1972). "Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects", *Southern California Law Review*, 45 (450).
- UNECE (2018). Albania - Environmental Performance Reviews. In *UNECE.org*. United Nations. Accessed on 8th February 2023, [von https://unece.org/DAM/env/epr/epr_studies/Leaflet/Booklet_3rdEPRAlbania.pdf](https://unece.org/DAM/env/epr/epr_studies/Leaflet/Booklet_3rdEPRAlbania.pdf)
- Van Der Voorn, T. & Quist, J. (2018). Analysing the Role of Visions, Agency, and Niches in Historical Transitions in Watershed Management in the Lower Mississippi River. *Water*, 10(12), 1845. <https://doi.org/10.3390/w10121845>
- Vejnović, I. & Gallop, P. (2018). *Financing for Hydropower in Protected Areas in Southeast Europe: 2018 update*. *EuroNatur & RiverWatch*. <https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Financing-hydropower-southeast-Europe-web-fin-1.pdf>
- Walker, M.U. (2015). 'Making Reparations Possible: Theorizing Reparative Justice', In C. Corradetti, N. Eisikovits & J. Volpe Rotondi (eds) *Theorizing Transitional Justice* (Farnham, Ashgate), 211–22.
- Widner, J. (2022). *The Case for Case Studies: Methods and Applications in International Development (Strategies for Social Inquiry)* (New). Cambridge University Press.
- Wieser, C. (2019) Fighting the Disappearance of Balkan Rivers. *The Ecological Citizen*, 2, 131–5.
- Wilk, B., Hegger, D. L. T., Dieperink, C., Kim, R. E. & Driessen, P. P. J. (2019). The Potential Limitations on its Basin Decision-Making Processes of Granting Self-Defence Rights to Father Rhine. *Water International*, 44(6–7), 684–700. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508060.2019.1651965>
- Williams, A. & Dupuy, K. (2017). Deciding over Nature: Corruption and Environmental Impact Assessments. *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 65, 118–124. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eiar.2017.05.002>

Annex

Interview Guides:

Interview Guide EcoAlbania:

- How did you get involved with EcoAlbania and what was your career path before that?
- How would you describe your emotional relationship with the Vjosa?
- How effective do you think is the level of environmental protection through the National Park status going to be for the Vjosa?
- What do you think is going to prevent the government from still planning hydropower or other construction projects on the Vjosa?
- Do you think that litigation that has been done on behalf of the Vjosa has set a new standard for environmental law enforcement in Albania?
- Do you think, the campaign has led to the empowerment of local communities and to a shift towards more public participation in Albanian river management in general?
- If you look back on the campaign, what were the main obstacles during the whole campaign to establish the National Park?
- How do you see the Vjosa campaign within the longer historical context of Albania?
- Do you think natural entities such as rivers should be granted legal rights to protect themselves from human interference, which would be a step further from national parks or protected area status?
- To what extent do you think can the National Park status be a means to prevent environmental injustice from happening again in the future?
- To what extent do you think the National Park could be the start of a fundamental transformation in Albanian river management?
- What lessons do you think can other Balkan states learn from the Vjosa case in terms of increasing their level of nature conservation?

Interview Guide EuroNatur Project Manager Balkan Rivers:

- How did your career path lead you to EuroNatur?
- How would you describe your emotional relationship with the Vjosa?
- How effective do you think is this new type of National Park going to be to protect the Vjosa?
- To what extent do you think did the lawsuits on the Vjosa lead to a new standard of implementation of environmental law in Albania?
- Do you think the Vjosa National Park campaign has led to improved participation in Albanian river management?
- Which role did scientific experts play in the declaration of the National Park?
- Which role did the media play in the success of the National Park campaign?
- Do you know about any rights of nature movements in Albanian?
- To what extent was the Vjosa river a topic in the last Albanian elections?
- What are the prospects for a fundamental transformation in Albanian river management after the successful campaign for the Vjosa?
- What lessons can other Balkan states learn from the Vjosa in terms of increasing the level of nature conservation of their rivers?

Interview Guide EuroNatur EU Policy Officer:

- How did your career path lead you to EuroNatur?
- How would you describe your emotional relationship with the Vjosa?

- How did you perceive the political discourse around the Vjosa on the EU level?
- How effective do you think is this new type of National Park going to be to protect the Vjosa?
- How were the reactions at the EU level after the declaration of the Vjosa National Park?
- To what extent did the EU accession process influence the declaration of the Vjosa National Park?
- To what extent do you think did the lawsuits on the Vjosa lead to a new standard of implementation of environmental law in Albania?
- Which role did the Bern Convention play in leading to the National Park Declaration?
- Do you think the Vjosa National Park campaign has led to improved participation in Albanian river management?
- What were the biggest obstacles at the European level in generating EU support for the campaign?
- To what extent did the declaration of the National Park advance the Albanian accession process?
- To what extent does the EU Renewable Energy Strategy promote the threat of hydropower development in the Balkans?
- Are there EU reforms on the way to encourage rights of nature approaches as implemented in Spain with the Mar Menor?
- How does the EU promote the implementation of the WFD in Albania?
- What are the prospects for a fundamental transformation in Albanian river management after the successful campaign for the Vjosa?
- What lessons can other Balkan states learn from the Vjosa in terms of increasing the level of nature conservation of their rivers?

Interview Guide IUCN:

- How would you describe the role of the IUCN in terms of contributing to the declaration of the National Park?
- To what extent did the Albanian Government take up the scientific recommendations by scientific experts and also the IUCN?
- How well would you say are the relevant government agencies equipped in implementing the National Park status of the Vjosa?
- Which kind of reforms are needed to properly implement the National Park management scheme?
- Do you think scientific evidence is going to be better integrated into future decision-making on the Vjosa National Park?
- What would you say is the role of local knowledge in the planning of the National Park?
- To what extent can the local communities' needs also be integrated with the objectives of the National Park?
- What do you think is the role of the EU accession process in the declaration of the National Park and also in setting standards or new standards for the European context?
- How can the potential dangers that an increase in tourism would bring through the declaration of the National Park be mitigated?
- To what extent does the Vjosa as the first Wild River National Park serve as a blueprint that could be replicated also for other rivers, be it in Albania or in other Balkan states?
- What do you think are the prospects for a general transition in Albanian river management after the Vjosa campaign?
- To what extent did the lawsuits that have been filed on behalf of the Versa by the NGO's lead to setting kind of new environmental standards for the enforcement of environmental law in Albania, especially in terms of hydropower development?
- What lessons can other Balkan states learn from the Vjosa in terms of increasing the level of nature conservation of their rivers?

Interview Guide EURACTIVE

- What did your career look like until you joined EURACTIVE?
- What did the Albanian discourse on the Vjosa look like before the campaign by EcoAlbania started?
- How did the government react to the campaign and which narrative did they use in relation to the Vjosa?
- To what extent did the Vjosa campaign increase awareness about nature conservation in the local population?
- Do you think the campaign has led to the empowerment of local communities and the improvement of public participation in river management in Albania?
- I also saw that there are municipal elections next week: which role is the Vjosa going to play in the elections?
- Which role did the EU accession process play in the declaration of the Vjosa National Park?
- How were the lawsuits by the NGOs covered by the media?
- What are the prospects for a fundamental transformation in Albanian river management after the successful campaign for the Vjosa?