The Routledge Handbook of Green Social Work

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The ecological hazards of nuclear waste disposal

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Tensions between aspirations for economic prosperity and community sustainability in a small Croatian municipality

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Introduction

The Croatian small municipality of Dvor is located in south central Croatia. The war circumstances during the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia heavily affected this part of the country which was populated mostly by a Serbian population. The whole territory around Dvor was occupied by a Serb minority for almost five years until Croatian forces conducted a military operation after which majority of Serbian residents left. Some of them decided to return till the end of the 1990s. Since the mid-1990s, the municipality of Dvor as well as its surrounding area started their socio-economic recovery which is progressing very slowly. Nowadays the municipality has 5570 inhabitants that are distributed through 64 small settlements (villages). Croatia built the first and only nuclear power plant in the former Yugoslavia as a joint venture with the Republic of Slovenia. The nuclear power station began working in 1983. According to the agreement between Republic of Slovenia and Republic of Croatia, the nuclear waste was to be jointly considered once the containers surrounding the nuclear power plant became full. This meant that initially, the Republic of Croatia would have to find the way of how and where to store the nuclear waste. The first information about the possible location for disposing of the nuclear waste around the municipality of Dvor began to appear during the 1990s. But it was a bit later that the first studies on environmental impact were conducted. However, all the processes regarding the disposal of nuclear waste in this area were conducted far from the eyes of local citizens with only sporadic and partial information being given to the interested public. With the aim of finding out hidden and visible processes that occurred around this development in the municipality of Dvor, research was carried out among key stakeholders. The special interest in conducting this research was to consider the actual and potential interest and influence that social work as profession could have on the whole situation and what lessons could be learned for the future development of nuclear waste disposal processes.
Literature review

Since the beginning of its professional development, social work has had to address tensions about which dominant orientation and influences should be taken into account when human development is studied and how it could be improved. In both the everyday social work practice and people’s lives in Croatia, individualism is growing as the dominant paradigm while collectivism is considered old, conservative and unpopular. The community as a romantic aspiration is a concept from earlier times and faces major difficulties in empowering the ideas of mutual responsibility, solidarity and understanding for others. Besides, Jani and Reisch (2011) note that the relationship between persons and the environment is viewed in a static, individually oriented manner that fails to recognise the differences that exist, among and within nations, based on cultural norms and political-economic realities. Although individualism is emphasised, the immediate victims of the (political) decisions are communities and community members. Poor communities that very often have neither capacity nor resources for their own defence come under particularly strong political pressure. The phenomenon of the unequal impact of environmental degradation upon poor people was elaborated by Bullard (2000), Pyles (2007), Dominelli (2012) and (2013a,b) and others. Bullard (1993–1994) introduced and defined the term ‘environmental racism’. Dominelli (2013a,b) extensively elaborates the concept of ‘environmental justice’ that had been earlier introduced by Ungar (2002), but not linked to social justice as Dominelli has done.

With the introduction of the concept of green social work, Dominelli (2012) opened a new era in elaborating relationships between people and their environments inside the social work profession. As noted by Dominelli green social work:

is a form of holistic professional social work practice that focuses on the: interdependencies amongst people, the social organisation of relationships between people and the flora and fauna in their physical habitats; and the interactions between socio-economic and physical environmental crises and interpersonal behaviours that undermine the well-being of human beings and planet Earth. It proposes to address these issues by arguing for a profound transformation in how people conceptualise the social basis of their society, their relationships with each other, living things and the inanimate world.

(2012: 25)

Through several decades of elaborating upon the relationships between people and their environment – for example, Germain (1973); Grinnell (1973); Coates (2004); McKinnon (2008); Bay (2010); and Alston (2013), to mention a few – most did not write so clearly about the concrete roles of the social workers in tackling environmental issues as did Dominelli (2012), Jarvis (2013) or Williams and Tedeschi (2013). In describing the green social worker’s tasks, Dominelli (2012) mentions activities that are oriented towards protection of the human rights violations, engagement in the process of bettering health and social services provisions, and influencing the economic system that perpetuates inequalities. A clear idea in the concept of green social work is that of empowering social workers to tackle structural issues when dealing with such visible deterioration in the human environment as has been witnessed during the past few decades. A similar approach can be found in Grey et al. (2012) when they argue that social workers’ interest in working with environmental issues opens a space for radicalising the profession. This gives social work the chance for revitalising its own roots and overcoming neoliberal influences. The ‘Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development’, adopted by three global organisations – IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers), ICSW (International Council of
Social Welfare), and IASSW (International Association of Schools of Social Work) — recognises a collective commitment to promote social and economic equalities, human rights and dignity, social relationships, and environmental sustainability (Global Agenda, 2012).

The differences between natural and human-made influences and disasters in the environment should be clarified. But regardless of cause, ‘disasters are conceptualized as having three phases: immediate relief, recovery and reconstruction’ (Dominelli, 2015: 661). The social work profession faces major challenges around the consequences of the diverse impacts of climate change and different types of disasters increasingly caused by humans. The sustainability of the natural environment is insecure and provokes professional reactions requiring answers. First, social work should show appropriate professional curiosity, find theoretical and methodological approaches to tackle these issues, and actively include all stakeholders in the process. Social work educators, students, and practitioners together with service users and other citizens are challenged in their practice and their lives to consider complex, interrelated, and systemic problems that require new approaches and innovations. Relying on professional principles and values, and moving towards more just communities, contemporary social workers should find and offer new ways of opposing current destructive tendencies to create sustainable societies.

Case study of the Dvor municipality in Croatia

This chapter presents a case study of a small Croatian municipality, Dvor, which was developmentally underprivileged for a long time, and currently faces decisions about disposing of nuclear waste on its territory. Municipality Dvor has a very low development index (38.59 per cent of the Croatian average). In the early 1990s, it was exposed to war, and its population includes Serbian nationals that depict a minority ethnic group in Croatia. Ethnic relations have become very complex, and after the War, the majority of the Serb population left, while the Croatian population previously living in Bosnia and Herzegovina has settled in Dvor. The municipality is along the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, isolated from the centres of power, facing strong demographic decline and holding a disadvantaged overall socio-political status (Miljenović, 2015). The general atmosphere in the community is nihilistic and not supportive of locally driven development (Miljenović, 2015). This is a result of a long period where Dvor, as an underdeveloped community, to a great extent relied on the central Yugoslav government for funds. When the demographic structure changed after Croatia’s Homeland War, it continued to be dependent of external support. Dvor municipality faces the same problems of the deconstructed communities typical of many other post-war communities in Croatia (Miljenović and Žganec, 2012). These are communities where the social fabric, including its social relations and economic background, has completely deteriorated. After 1995, these communities have had to deal with establishing new relations and finding new development perspectives.

In 2015, the central government imposed a project of developing a nuclear waste disposal unit in the former military complex in the area of Trgovačka Gora located in Dvor municipality. This story, however, is much older. It goes back to the period of Yugoslavia, but has now become more intensified under the auspices of the European Union. Croatia had previously an obligation to take care of its own nuclear waste which had so far been stashed in Krško, a joint nuclear power station with Slovenia.

This example illustrates several key concepts in framing green social work: environmental justice, human rights violation, deterioration of the quality of life, and environmental tendencies towards degradation within the context of continuing economic inequalities. Furthermore, it was particularly important to recognise community processes in order to better understand community social capital.
The data presentation is organised to address: a) strategies that decision-makers use to deliver ecologically risky action in a community; b) community processes that are triggered by ecological issues; and c) human rights discourses and possibilities of structurally engaged social work practice. This research is based on multiple data sources – interviews with key stakeholders, activists, social workers and residents, media sources, and researchers’ participatory observation. Interviews were conducted with 19 key informants that were somehow involved directly in the process: four out of eight representatives of the local municipality (LM), two out of three social workers (SW), three local activists heading two activist organisations (ACT), six representatives of the youth population (YOU) working within two local youth associations, and four local farmers (FA) as members of the municipal council composed of 15 members overall. The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

**Strategies to deliver a nuclear waste disposal project within a community**

The first research topic was to cover strategies in delivering nuclear waste to the community. There is a strong sense of violated environmental justice and one cannot avoid thinking about this initiative in the context of perpetuating economic inequalities. The consequences of nuclear waste disposal on human health still are not visible. However, there is a sense that the distribution of environmental burdens among the local population is not just and that decision-making processes about this project are not transparent. Several sub-topics were included here: placing the burden onto a community already burdened by economic inequalities, prevailing negative attitudes, acknowledged multidimensional developmental risks (ecological, economic, political, and social), information strategies that reduced substantially citizens’ resistance, and unclear ideas about how this issue will develop further.

**Burdening a disadvantaged community**

The community that has already suffered severe developmental issues now faces additional ecological burdens. The community is characterised by chronic economic deprivation accompanied by a general atmosphere of nihilism, lack of developmental prospects and a decreased population figures:

> Simply, I have a feeling that we have all stumbled down, that we have lost a faith that anything positive is possible. If they ignore you, if they don’t respect what you have to say, if they don’t respect your rights... I don’t know about you, but I have a feeling that other people decide on our destiny, our future.

(YOU, 4)

Economic deprivation is recognised not solely as a result, but also a long-term process wherein local resources were neither recognised nor used properly. This is due to previously described conditions when the community was not supported to be autonomous and proactive in its past. In this context, the notion of developing nuclear waste disposal facilities was to a great extent received with a prevailing negative attitude. This local community’s resistance was explained through the multidimensional developmental risks that would occur if the nuclear disposal facility were to be established. People recognised risks not only in ecology, but also in the local economy, social relations and community stigmatisation. Risks were already evident
during transportation because the traffic infrastructure was not adequate for this purpose. Several informants pointed out health risks having in mind that terrain for nuclear waste disposal is close to a residential area and water sources along the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Some informants identified direct threats to the local economy by reducing the quality of agricultural products. However, the greatest threat was most often found in further local community stigmatisation that would also transfer to local agriculture:

Because people’s consciousness . . . no matter how much something can be good, he [sic] always has it in his head that it is bad, and runs far from it . . . so just thinking about local honey, [he] says NO, he leaves and turns away . . . regardless, it can be a thousand times OK, but this is it.

(ACT, 2)

Some informants have concluded that this process will eventually lead towards total community deprivation and further depopulation.

Since previous opinions clearly demonstrate local community resistance and scepticism, an informant recognised that leading figures have deliberately chosen information strategies that favour the lowest level of citizens’ resistance. However, these increased the local population’s sense that the process is not transparent. These information strategies include a lack of consistent information. This would change from time to time; for example, changing the site of the terrain that would house the disposal unit, alongside the lack of information or even hiding information. Information on developing the nuclear waste disposal facility was hidden from its very beginning and some informants found about it accidentally. Some question whether the disposal unit for radioactive waste has already been built, but information about that is unavailable. Also, some information that was distributed was false, such as false population presentations displaying a worse education structure than it really was. Due to hidden or not widely distributed information, online communication channels became the dominant form for informing others (e.g. Facebook).

The most dominant information strategies presented the situation as completely risk-free and promoted economic benefits as a key discourse. From official information channels and experts that worked on the project, the only information that was sent demonstrated no risks for the community whatsoever. This was clearly suspicious:

Absolutely, for them there is no risk . . . not for water, it doesn’t matter that [it] is near the Una river, no, not a chance, or that the terrain is seismically active. Hold on, how did they manage to build all this without risk in such a short period of time?

(LM, 2)

The second information strategy was placing economic benefits as a central discourse. External actors believed this would be attractive to an economically deprived population. There was a message that approximately 1.1 million Euros would be distributed for local level infrastructural benefits (e.g. roads, sanitation, and school facilities as compensation) or that children will be awarded by symbolic gifts (e.g. tablets or free holidays). This information strategy raised a lot of mistrust among local residents that will be explained in the section on community processes.

This topic was, and still is, very challenging not only for the local community, but also for the central government. All respondents pointed out that this is an old subject going way back to the period of the former Yugoslavia, and that there is no clarity about what will happen in the
The talk about the project is currently less intense, without clear feedback about whether something is going on behind the scenes, or the topic has been set aside to a future time.

If I could know that this will be over tomorrow, that this story will end . . . but it won’t end, we are wasting our time. . . . This is just a short slack, we all know that is not over.

(Act 5)

Community processes in light of developing a nuclear waste disposal unit

In this thematic section, community processes are considered as a ground for developing community social capital. The central concept that appeared at all levels is mistrust among community stakeholders. This will be analysed as a separate issue. Another visible feature is the appearance of community activism and dualism among the local population and local political structures. These topics were the most prominent ones. Community processes were additionally strengthened as people recognised the oppressed position of local community. Community processes are strongly coloured by intense emotional responses that are somehow interwoven within the previous topics. In many ways, the issue of trust became central during the interviews with local informants.

Distrust of community structures

This seems to take place at almost all levels of functioning. Distrust is partially deriving from the current situation, but it also appears due to previous circumstances connected with the War at the beginning of the 1990s. Being faced with misused local resources and in conditions of severe material deprivation, local habitants accepted that every kind of economic benefit would not be fairly distributed, and that key local figures would agree on siting a nuclear waste disposal unit in their municipality to gain significant personal material rewards:

As soon as someone mentions money, it’s like the bone is thrown. And you know how it’s like with people, they are poor and then they change. [The] majority of people are against this because they know that the money wouldn’t reach them. But those that expect some benefits are mostly in higher political positions.

(YOU, 3)

Mistrust prevented or at least made it difficult to talk about the issue openly and objectively since any kind of objective interest also had a significant chance of being interpreted as being in favour of a nuclear waste disposal unit. Thus, this topic eventually turned out to be a sort of local taboo. Clear distrust is also shown towards central state representatives, including its expert delegates. Local residents had no confidence that in this case, state politicians would show sufficient responsibility. They claim that if this is a good proposal, it would definitely not be offered to the Dvor municipality. According to local informants, many other infrastructural projects were previously conducted without an adequate level of professional analysis.

Mistrust is also demonstrated towards the local municipality resulting in deteriorating relations towards local politicians and a dualism among local population and local political structures. The local municipality decided to position itself as a mediator between the central state and local population, sending a message that this process in unavoidable and that the local community needs to be wise enough to secure the most out of this situation. They were also a messenger sending information from central state level to residents. This was interpreted as positive attitude.
for developing a nuclear waste disposal unit and local municipality representatives to claim that they were pushed between these two forces: the central government and the local population. This position is followed by continuous verbal conflicts and pressures on an everyday basis whereby local political structures are blamed for developing nuclear waste disposal sites:

Who decided this? Few names? Why did you decide this? Why haven’t you consulted with the people? We are all here only temporarily, this is not our ownership. We have borrowed this from our grandchildren.

(FA, 4)

However, local politicians also claim that a certain level of this conflict was in favour of their political opponents since local elections have been announced for 2017. This is also in line with a continuously non-constructive political climate and culture of nurturing divisions among local residents.

An intense emotional response is found among local informants through not only the proposal to build a nuclear waste disposal unit, but also community processes marked with significant levels of mistrust. Informants reported feelings of fear, helplessness, hysteria, considered this disposal unit a new trauma among an already over-traumatised population, and demonstrated strong distress:

I was 18 . . . when this news was announced, I couldn’t sleep for nights because the idea that we have beautiful nature, and that everything could be destroyed. . . . I live in a village and nature is my life, and when someone destroys your life, you are not happy with this at all, and associations raise something even worse.

(YOU, 3)

The closed local context and experiences make inhabitants highly sensitive about being blocked from participating in objective discussions about the issue. Some informants, deeply involved in this process, felt fatigued and eventually thought of giving up:

People are still not aware, they would like to push this aside, and they long for clear decision and finishing the process, but don’t want to participate in all this.

(LM, 1)

Strong emotional engagement, dominant negative orientation and lack of trust among stakeholders eventually resulted in the appearance of community activism. There is no previous experience of community activism and this seems to be a recent pioneer example. At first, activism appeared outside the community in neighbouring municipality, and just recently on a local level. Activists are mostly acting in synergy even though the activist scene outside the community is led by a youth leader and within the community by female activists. Activism in the community appeared instantly through a group of people who had not acted together previously. Activists are using creative and symbolic techniques such as satire, movie production, performance, and provocation to get heard:

We made a performance where I showed up in white and brought a box. Police came. They didn’t know what was in the box, and I acted as if radioactive waste was inside. I wanted to say that you don’t see radiation, you don’t feel it.

(YOU, 5)
Also, community activists are developing their power by creating a wider network of their allies particularly foreign experts, eco-activists, media, other politicians and other people from neighbouring communities. Due to problems being found in information-sharing processes, activists found their roles in sharing widely available and expert-based information to challenge the official one. Their approach is reactive waiting for the situation to develop further before providing adequate responses. In future, activists will include legal action. Activists are visible, but a significant proportion of the local population remains passive, in the belief that their action does not matter, and allowing outdoor activists to act on their behalf.

All these processes reveal that local relations are complex. First, local residents are united in holding prevailingly negative attitudes. On the level between residents and decision-makers, there are tensions and the general atmosphere is that this topic is taboo, resulting in a reluctance to even raise the subject for further discussion:

I was all for hearing about this in silence, and then carefully ask about it. But, someone provoked hysteria on purpose and challenged us who were in a position and in a situation to make fast decisions.

(\textit{ACT, 8})

Finally, this event emancipated the idea that community is facing an oppressed position. This can be also strongly connected to the lack of environmental justice and structural inequalities. Local informants believed that stigmatisation was not only a result, but also a source of the proposal to build nuclear waste disposal unit here. Dvor was one of proposed locations, but there were also several more that eventually were not chosen. Informants believe that other locations had strong lobbying agents with sufficient political power. Some of them suspected that choosing a deprived area with a mostly older and less-educated population would cause the least disruption. There is a strong belief that the community cannot manage its own development and that the state can easily find legal sources to impose its final decision. One example that demonstrates this opinion is that legal legislation is unclear about this issue. The local community has the authority to express its own opinions. However, according to local informants, the term community for them is vague and it can be literally anything – a certain village, municipality, several municipalities, or the county.

As this community shares a border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, holding a dialogue on this with Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be avoided. This relation is currently ambivalent. Bosnian stakeholders could become ‘natural allies’, however, new sources of conflict have arisen, particularly at the political level. Relations between these countries have become fragile due to the history of war between them, but they can be turned into a mutually beneficial developmental resource through which to develop joint projects. The situation is now worse and the level of tensions has heightened. This can be seen in local Bosnian media that accuse the Croatian municipality for imposing hazardous nuclear waste in the area without consulting them in this matter.

\textbf{Awakening human rights discourses and making space for social work}

This point raises the concepts of human rights and quality of life as central to green social work. Although the topic of a nuclear waste disposal unit raised complex emotional, social,
and economic responses, the discourse of human rights has not developed enough. Instead, it was replaced with a summation of the direct risks to the local economy. When asked, local informants had just become aware that human rights discourse is a potential platform for advocating for the local population’s interests. Thus, this category is named *awakening human rights discourses*. This resulted in the recognition of the violation of the right to choose and the right to be informed. The right to a healthy environment, a key justification for green social work, was recognised to a lesser extent. Due to the violation of the right to be informed, several informants demonstrated anger and feelings of being undermined as indicated in the following exchange:

*Interviewer:* Do you feel if some of your rights have been violated?
*Respondent:* Of course they have. To begin with, let’s start with this study. We say that we are near the water sources, they say ‘No’. We say that we are in a flood-risk area, they say ‘No’. We say that we are in a seismic active area – they say ‘No, you are not.’

(FA, 6)

The right to choose and participate in decision-making processes is strongly violated according to these informants. This would entail not only a right to express personal opinions in public debates, but also clearly understood regulation of the formal local decision-making processes. For example, the local municipality has been unable to receive a clear response about whether it is entitled to hold local referendum and if so, what its legal strength would be.

When it comes to responsibility for protecting human rights, most informants acknowledge the responsibility of the local, regional and state politicians. This is a dominant point where the role of local people or other experts are considered unimportant. So far, social work has not been included in this process in any way. Thus, informants reflected on the topic *making space for social work*. They perceived social work as a profession that has roles in facilitating communication, informing citizens about the drawbacks and advantages of siting such a facility in their community, and protecting human rights. Social work is considered especially important in reaching vulnerable and isolated groups, and encouraging participation in decision-making processes. Social workers can implement such roles because they can access the most vulnerable populations, have an impact in the community, and are interested in community development. Building this new space has been burdened by poor cooperation among local institutions and the view that social workers engage mainly in social care:

In our municipality social workers resolve literally life threatening issues for basic existence. Something in . . . raising consciousness, encouragement, protection of rights – no . . . it is possible that there are some experts with this capacity, but I don’t see them in our surroundings.

(LM, 2)

**The new role of critical social work in responding to ecologically hazardous circumstances**

This case study could be illustrative for detecting concepts relevant to green social work and community processes in situations where community environments are threatened. They provide a starting point to think about the role of social workers in light of each topic in the research findings as indicated in Table 31.1.
Table 31.1 Green social work roles in community development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Suggested role of social worker</th>
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| a) Issues of environmental justice and perpetuated economic inequalities | • further burdening of disadvantaged communities  
• advocating for a national level for balanced and just local development  
• mobilising community members to accomplish small successes that can raise feelings of self-confidence and strength  
• mobilising people to form alliances, taskforce groups, and local associations that can resist and provide productive ideas on community development  
• acknowledged multidimensional developmental risks including health, ecology, production, area stigmatisation  
• developing creative ways to incorporate community-based participatory action research in the development and planning processes, including impact studies and community health profiles (Dominelli, 2012)  
• information strategies that discourage citizens’ involvement: lack of consistent information, hiding information, false information, presenting a situation as completely risk-free, and emphasising economic benefits in key discourses  
• using broad scale communication tools – local newspapers, electronic media, social media, public engagement – debates, round tables, and mini conferences to inform community members about current and future developments  
• nurturing transparent and competent information sharing |
| b) Community processes in the context of environmental threats | • mistrust of community structures  
• supporting people in organising and conducting information channels that provide proper information flows in both directions: top-down and bottom-up  
• facilitating joint actions that promote community trust  
• appearance of community activism and creating ally networks  
• empowering community members in sustaining local action groups that are based on local knowledge, experience, resources and needs  
• dualism among local population and local political structures.  
• facilitating and mediating solution-oriented discussions between stakeholders to develop viable alternatives to environmental projects that prioritise environmental sustainability over profits (Philip & Reisch, 2015)  
• oppressed position of a local community: stigmatisation as a source of problem, the belief that a community cannot manage its development  
• empowering and strengthening community leaders to influence political decision-making processes inside and outside of community  
• intense emotional responses: fear, helplessness, strong distress, fatigue  
• developing and supporting community self-help groups, establishing a community center with skilled professionals who can raise the quality of community mental health  
• complex local relations – a population united through prevailing negative attitudes; raised tensions around decision-makers  
• Integrating community members to community assets to maximise existing community potential. Helping community members in negotiating processes involving different parts of the community. |
Conclusion

Potentially dangerous effects to communities often tend to be hidden from residents. Such processes usually develop mistrust and animosity among the main community stakeholders. The community’s political structures for electing representatives to act in the interests of community members, as shown by the results of this research, do not act properly when they leave the community uninformed and confused about the realisation of its own future. Regardless of the fact that Croatia as a country has adopted all the main human rights conventions and related documents, practice and everyday life show how difficult it may be to transfer these principles and duties into practice. It seems that community members are very often left to act alone without any structured and organised support or needed resources. This challenges social work as a human rights-oriented and social justice-based profession. Although environmental influences on the lives of community members have become more intensely the subject of practice, research, and theoretical elaboration in social work, only recently has the existing state of the art shown that social work faces numerous possibilities that can offer useful solutions to such issues. As noted by Drolet et al. (2015), sustainability, environmental justice and green social work are of growing interest to social work students, faculty, and social workers at local and global levels. Social workers are challenged in their practice to consider complex, interrelated and systemic problems that require new approaches and innovations. Using multiple methods and techniques from the broad range of community development practices and research, alongside political, critical, and radical approaches to social problems, and connecting scientific expertise to appropriate local knowledges and citizen’s skills in coproducing new solutions, social workers can play very significant roles in shaping the future of the world. Green social work provides them with a model for pursuing this ambition in Dvor – to address the issues raised by placing a nuclear waste disposal unit in its locality.

References


