

Activists and NGOs from Montenegro pointed out that Sinjajevina should remain the preserve of livestock farmers for agriculture and tourism; a group of 83 NGOs from Montenegro, the region, and the world asked the President of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic, and the future Parliament and Government of Montenegro to immediately stop the development of the military range in Sinjajevina and leave the area available to livestock farmers for agricultural and tourism development.

“Civil society organizations have supported the residents of Sinjajevina and surrounding villages and towns and expressed concern over the militarization of the second-largest pasture in Europe. According to the Montenegrin National Strategy and Biodiversity Action Plan, Sinjajevina was the subject of accession negotiations with the European Union (EU). It should have been declared a regional nature park before the end of 2020. It has been, as they recall, registered as an Important Plant Area (IPA) since 2016 and proposed as an area of bird protection and an area of particular interest for the conservation of the EMERALD network, a status which Sinjajevina would acquire after Montenegro accedes to the EU,” the Civic Initiative Let’s Save Sinjajevina announced.

They recall that Sinjajevina is a part of the UNESCO Tara Biosphere Reserve and borders the Durmitor National Park, one of the oldest in the Balkans. In September 2019, the Government “ignored a legitimately and legally voted petition of more than 3,000 citizens opposing opening a military training ground on over 7,500 hectares in the heart of the mountain.” The same year Montenegrin, American, Austrian, Slovenian, and Italian troops participated in NATO’s first international military training, “using over half a tonne of explosives, while the local population was present with its herds on the mountain.”

The joint statement points out that the military training ground endangers at least 25,000 families on the slopes of Sinjajevina, but also the preservation of biological diversity and the local ecosystem. They point out that no assessments of the impact of the military range on the environment have been made, as well as any medical and socio-economic consequences of the creation of the army range on the mountain.

“We call on the President of Montenegro, Mr. Milo Djukanovic, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense, the President of the Parliament and the Government of Montenegro to immediately stop the militarization of the territory of Sinjajevina and make an independent environmental and citizen impact assessment, including health, social and economic aspects. They must ensure the participation of citizens in the decision-making process on how Sinjajevina is to be used. We seek the protection of traditional lifestyles and ecosystems following Chapter 27 on EU accession. Steps should be made to begin implementing European environmental standards defined in the Green New Agreement for Europe and

relevant EU directives (EIA Directive 85/337 / EEC) as well as the statement of the UN Aarhus Convention. We call for the involvement of Sinjajevina local communities in political processes, whenever decisions affect them,” stated 83 NGOs, adding that local communities should play a crucial role in determining the use of space, as announced from the Civic Initiative Let’s Save Sinjajevina.

ICCA Consortium spokesman Marco Basi, a member of the Council responsible for Southern Europe and the Mediterranean, and anthropology professor at the University of Palermo in Italy, said areas like Sinjajevina are not just neutral, geographical or productive land, but “territory of life.” He pointed out that the management of Sinjajevina is based on ancient institutions such as the Katun and the choir leading to the roots of Montenegro and their identity.

“The recognition of Sinjajevina as a biosphere reserve of the UNESCO Tara canyon, the presence of Natura 2000 sites and European Union studies to turn it into a regional park, speak of the ability of local communities to use these areas in harmony with nature, turning Sinjajevina into an area of global heritage.

“It can be a moment to choose peace, demilitarization and de-escalation of the conflict,” said Basi, who pledged the ICCA consortium’s support in fighting to protect Sinjajevina using the experience of Italy, which protected the Katun way of life by law.

His colleague Joam Evans shared, as announced from the GI Let’s Save Sinjajevina, his experiences and the struggle of his community against mining in Spain. He stated that their struggle for land has been going on for decades, but that they manage to resist “the attacks of an industry that wants to destroy the whole community’s life.”

“That is why we stand by Sinjajevina and support your fight to protect your mountain. The voice of the locals must not be ignored, they must know what is planned for their country, and no actions can be taken against their will,” he pointed out.

On behalf of Land Rights Now, Sabine Palace expressed solidarity with the traditional communities of Sinjajevina and supported the untouched nature of the mountain. She stated that in many countries, land protection is crucial in the fight against poverty, hunger and climate change.

“The right to land is also a human rights issue, especially where indigenous peoples and local communities have ruled the land for centuries. Land rights are part of protecting the diversity of life, culture, and language whose beauty and meaning they attach to our lives. Saving Sinjajevina is an occasion “for all of us, not just the citizens of Montenegro. What is at stake here is the unique biodiversity and natural beauty that should concern everyone,” she said.

The Director of the Environmental Movement Ozone and the representative of the Coalition for Sustainable Development (KOR), Aleksandar Perović, called on the future Government of Montenegro to deviate from previous practices, and repeal the decision to declare Sinjajevina a military training ground. He stated that the next Government would have a partner for environmental issues in the KOR and expect to be respected since that has not been the case thus far.

“If the ignorant attitude towards the civil initiative for the protection of Sinjajevina continues, we tell the new Government that we will use all civil resistance mechanisms to protect the public interest. And that is to put Sinjajevina under the appropriate level of national and international protection,” said Perovic.

The representative of the Civic Initiative Let’s Save Sinjajevina, Milan Sekulović, pointed out that preserving Sinjajevina is a matter of respecting the protection of human rights. He highlighted that the Civic Initiative Save Sinjajevina remains consistent in their request to repeal the decision to declare Sinjajevina a military training ground, and insists on the intention to protect the area by declaring it a regional nature park developing agriculture and tourism.

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