

As Europe embarks on a rocky transition to renewable energy, Albania, where hydropower produces almost 100% of electricity, is facing its own issues. Communities impacted by the building of hydroelectric dams are fighting back, and they are winning.

In less than six months, Albanian courts have slammed the breaks on three hydropower projects in the country. Each suspension came from pressure from citizens who said the projects would destroy their culture, livelihood, and the local environment.

“Ceasing the operations of HPPs is crucial to protecting and preserving the river’s natural flow and preventing the potentially catastrophic effect on habitats and flora and fauna,” said Catherine Bohne, director of TOKA, a campaign group that brought several court cases against HPP companies in Valbona, northern Albania.

“The battle is far from over,” she added however, saying they would continue to fight with all legal means necessary.

Albania’s reliance on hydropower

Albania’s reliance on hydropower started during its almost-50 year communist rule as part of dictator Enver Hoxha’s drive for energy self-sufficiency.

Today, almost all of the country’s energy is produced through hydropower. But as electricity cannot be stored, excess production is sold during peak production times (spring and summer), meaning fossil fuel energy must be bought at a premium during the winter months.

Furthermore, changes in the region’s climate have led to warnings that hydropower is not mid or long-term sustainable. Less snow, less rain, and longer, warmer summers mean less water in Albanian rivers.

Already, power production ranges between 6,000 GWh to less than 3,000 GWh and climate change could see a further decrease of up to 20% by 2050, according to estimates.

Last year, the International Renewable Energy Agency report on Albania said hydropower will not suffice to ensure energy security in the country, and warned the situation is likely to further deteriorate. Instead, the IEA put forward wind and solar energy as a preferred method of electricity production as Albania enjoys some of the highest sunshine hours in the region.

Despite this, the government is pressing ahead with hydropower projects, including many in national parks and protected areas. It currently has around 170 dams and over 300 plants in various stages of completion.

The situation in Valbona

One emblematic case is the Valbona River in Tropoje, one of Europe’s poorest regions in the far north of Albania. Many residents have emigrated and those who remain depend on agriculture and the promise of tourism.

A local company there, Genr 2, won state concessions to build hydropower plants along the river, in a process mired in alleged corruption. Local residents testified in court that names

of dead relatives were used on documents claiming to show support for the project. Others found their names had been used without their permission.

A number of court cases were filed by TOKA against the companies involved, citing a lack of proper environmental impact assessments, threats against opponents, and the fact that such constructions should not take place in a national park.

In July, Albania's High Court ruled that the operation of two plants in the region must be suspended and a local bailiff ensured on 8 November that both plants were non-operational. But Bohne warned the battle is not over as the plants, which are operated remotely, can come online with the flick of a switch, in which case she said she was ready to press criminal charges against the companies involved.

Zall Gjocaj national park

During the same week that saw Valbona's HPPs grind to a halt, the Tirana Court of Appeals upheld the revocation of a license to build HPPs in the Zall-Gjocaj protected area in the north.

Residents have been protesting against the proposed plants for several years, claiming their livelihood, homes, and agricultural activities were at stake and insisting that the area, which includes parts of the Lura Mali e Dejes national park, must remain intact.

Residents have also filed complaints against the companies and government officials in the special anti-corruption court, citing abuse of office, forgery of documents, and construction in a protected area. The case is currently ongoing.

Vjosa national park now

One of the most famous anti-HPP campaigns has been that of the Vjosa National Park in central Albania. Several HPPs are planned along its length, sparking fury from environmental activists who describe the stream as the last untouched river in Europe. Along with tens of powerplants, Shell has been exploring for oil along its banks, and an airport and luxury hotels are planned for another section. This resulted in a significant reaction from NGOs, both locally and internationally, including international brand Patagonia, and movie star Leonardo di Caprio.

Images of white sheets spelling out "Vjosa National Park now" have appeared all over the world, from Sydney to Paris, and di Caprio has publicly called for an end to HPPs on the river on multiple occasions.

Activists are calling for the entire 272 km-long Vjosa River to be made a national park. This would prevent any HPPs from being constructed there and bring ample touristic opportunities.

The government has designated parts of the river as a 'protected area'. But the reality is that this still leaves it open for development, because of contracts already negotiated for the airport and luxury hotels, and a multi-million euro contract signed with Shell in 2018. CEO of Patagonia, Ryan Gellert, told EURACTIV partner Exit News that hydropower is

antiquated technology and should not be considered renewable.

“Hydropower is the only renewable energy that is sending species to extinction, displacing people, and contributing to climate change. It’s not renewable energy, that’s a dated notion. Albania should be seeking proper renewable energy...I would encourage the government to consider which other technologies they could pursue,” he said.

For now, the Vjosa is safe as locals won a court case to halt construction of the Kalivac dam which would operate on a tributary of the Vjosa.

Olsi Nika, a biologist for EcoAlbania, said the Court’s decision “represents another message to the [Albanian] government that it must once and for all give up on building hydroelectric power plants and declare the Vjosa Valley a national park as soon as possible”.

The wider picture

But resistance against hydropower is growing elsewhere in the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a group of local women prevented the construction of plants on the Kruscica River. In Kosovo, the Supreme Court shut down three HPPs operated by Austrian company Kelag, pending a final court decision over environmental risk assessments.

In Europe, the global conservation group WWF is running a campaign to stop public subsidies of hydropower projects, saying that dams reduce freshwater biodiversity by 80% and migratory fish populations by 55% and warning that more than 8,000 hydro plants are planned across the continent.

It also called for the money to be spent on “low cost, low carbon, low-impact alternatives” such as wind and solar.

Meanwhile, the EU delegation to Albania told Exit.al that environmental standards must be respected when putting forward new hydroelectricity projects.

“Investments in hydropower should strictly comply with national and international environmental, nature protection, and water management obligations” and “include high-quality assessments of the cumulative impacts on nature and biodiversity,” the EU delegation said.

Source: euractiv.com