

Balkan states continue to back controversial hydroelectricity projects, despite experts' urging that solar power would be a better option long term.

Some 2,796 hydroelectric power plants are scheduled for construction in the Balkans over the next few years. According to the NGO RiverWatch, 740 are to be built in Albania, which boasts a total geographical area of just under 29,000 square kilometers.

Fifteen years ago, former Albanian president, Sali Berisha, declared his ambition to transform the country into a Balkan "power" house. No background research went into the plan, nor was a feasibility study ever conducted.

"The plan received the blessing of investors, who naturally supported the initiative. This set the ball rolling to make the necessary legal changes. During Berisha's time in office, 183 contracts were signed, and 420 small hydroelectric plants were given the go-ahead," says Olsi Nika, executive director of nongovernmental organization Eco Albania.

The process continued during the administration of Edi Rama, despite the fact that the government was elected on a promise "to put an end to this madness," adds Nika. According to data supplied by the online register of the National Agency of Natural Resources, 252 companies have been awarded construction and operation licenses for 500 hydroelectric power plants (HPPs). According to Nika, however, the total number of HPPs in Albania is actually 740.

What is the environmental impact?

Miriam Ndini, a civil engineer and member of the working group reporting on Albania to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), says that Albania's small hydroelectric plants are mainly cascade-type, "run-of-the-river" installations, with most schemes requiring the placement of embankment or canal diversions. "Such installations cause a disconnect to occur between deep and surface water, yet it takes years for the impact to become apparent," says Ndini.

The Albanian Ministry of the Environment disagrees. With regard to the environmental impact of HPPs, the ministry maintains that hydroelectric power is one of the most environmentally-friendly forms of energy production.

Based on his long-term studies and observations, Olsi Nika says the consequences of small hydroelectric plants are disastrous for the environment and biodiversity. "Seventy species of fish that are only found in the Balkans inhabit these rivers: elsewhere they have died out. Why? Because their habitats have been destroyed by human hands," says Nika.

Solar power a better option?

Alex Miho, a professor at the Faculty of Natural Sciences in Tirana, confirms that changes in water flow lead to a deterioration in water quality, which in turn has a knock-on effect on river ecosystems in their entirety. In many rivers in Albania, the operation of HPPs has already decimated the native eel population.

For his part, Nika has conducted extensive research into trout. "In the larval stage, trout

need specific conditions near the source of the river. These conditions are not found along the length of a watercourse. The moment you erect a dam, the trout cannot access their spawning grounds,” he says.

Another problem Nika points out is that almost 40% of the HPPs planned in Albania are within or very close to protected areas, meaning they are bound to impact already fragile ecosystems.

Ndini adds that — while taking climate change into account — Albania would have done better to opt for solar power as its primary source of energy creation. “We have endless sun; we have 220 days of sunshine a year. Of course, we also have rivers and water, but climate change is altering the timing of water availability. Dry periods are getting longer, and temperatures are rising. This being the situation, we need to focus more on solar energy,” she says.

‘The river is our livelihood’

For those in the nearby villages, the building of HPPs means destruction. “The river is our livelihood,” says 70-year-old Sotir Zahoaliaj from the village of Brataj, located on the banks of the Shushica in southern Albania.

Resul Baleta, from the village Guri i Bardhe in northern Albania, says: “HPPs endanger the future of the villages.”

“Our countryside is beautiful, unspoiled. Tourists are just beginning to discover it, but if the HPP project goes ahead we will lose everything.”

The controversy over HPPs is not, however, a uniquely Albanian problem. Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina are facing the same headache. According to the nongovernmental organization Eko Akcija, 115 small hydroelectric plants have already been built in Bosnia, and at least 340 more are in various stages of planning, preparation and construction.

Civil society takes on big business

The women from Kruscica village in central Bosnia are examples of how civil society help protect the rivers. Not only did they block the local construction of an HPP, but they have also encouraged others who care about river protection in Bosnia to get involved. The struggle is ongoing since 2017, as evidenced by a recent public debate in October, when the investor in question insisted on pushing ahead with the building of projected HPPs.

“We said it four years ago, and we repeated it today during the public hearing: Kruscica will not sacrifice a river at the expense of life; we are only defending what is ours,” says Amela Zukan, president of the environmental association Bistro.

Referencing the lack of respect afforded to institutions and laws by the rich and powerful, Zukan added that it is “extremely sad and unbelievable” that the city council says one thing, and the investor carries on regardless.

'Because it concerns us'

Zukan and the brave women of Kruscica are not about to give up on the river. Amna Popovac, from the Mostar association "Jer nas se tice" (literally 'because it concerns us'), supports the women of Kruscica and believes that the only people mini hydroelectric plants serve are the investors.

"At Mostar, we have banned the construction of hydroelectric plants on the Buna canals. Such installations are a great pity: they don't provide us with new workplaces or employment, in fact, they give us nothing. Investors make a quick buck, lining their pockets at the expense of resources that belong to all of us," says Popovac.

She adds that, with the capacity for wind and solar plants, there is no need for HPPs in Bosnia. Just like in Albania, Bosnia, especially the southern part, is full of sun and the energy can be used.

Environmental activism takes persistence

Maida Bilal, an environmental, legal and judicial activist, received the Goldman award for her role in the campaign to block the Kruscica hydroelectric plant. She became involved in environmental activism with the goal of saving the river, knowing it was going to be a difficult, exhausting, dangerous and long struggle.

According to Bilal, the government is ignoring the extent of the problem. She argues that "the authorities must urgently adopt a law banning the construction of harmful small hydroelectric plant projects and react faster to inspections and supervision.

It is obvious to the naked eye that HPPs violate all regulations on minimum biological standards, the correct construction of fishways, biodiversity preservation, etc." Bilal concludes by saying that a problem cannot be solved until the whole system is set in motion, and that it all starts with the individual.

She has a message for her fellow Bosnians: "They need to raise their voices for our rivers: this water is our common national treasure! Often we are not even aware of what we have until we lose it, but if we lose our water, we will have forfeited our future and the future of our children, and their children's children."

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