

Government institutions issued permits for the construction of a small hydro plant Zlate. Local residents say that they had no say, even though regulations and conventions guarantee their rights in the matter.

Jablanica native Samir Šišić was unpleasantly surprised when he came across machinery near his father's land digging out the Doljanka's river bed to lay down a pipeline for a new small hydro.

Previously, Šišić had managed to halt start of construction over his plot. Thus, the Jablanica municipality had to change the zoning permit to divert construction work into the river bed. Despite that, the system for irrigation of raspberries on Šišić's estate was destroyed in the work.

Eko-Vat, a firm owned by Mirza Teletović, a former Bosnian basketball player in the NBA, is building the hydro power plant Zlate. In the fall 2018, it began work without the local community's approval.

According to the regulations, Eko-Vat should have secured the community's approval through a convention before starting construction. Even though villagers say that the convention never took place, the firm got five representatives of the council of the local community Jablanica 2 on board.

Authorities also failed to rally villagers to attend another convention - a public discussion on the environmental impact of the proposed hydro plant. Residents say that they had not been informed about the convention which was held in the Jablanica city hall. Along with Eko-Vat employees and government representatives, only four residents of villages along the Doljanka river were present.

Afterwards, more than 200 villagers from the Zlate and Jelačići settlements signed a petition against the construction. The municipality didn't accept it and the construction started several months later.

"People always complain about something. That's totally fine," says Teletović. "I'm just disappointed that people don't understand the project. I'm disappointed that people don't understand me as someone who hails from Jablanica."

Convention without Citizens

CIN reporters accompanied Teletović on a visit of the planned 3-kilometer long construction site.

"This small hydro plant was not built so that I would profit from it," says Teletović. "It is built to build other projects."

He said that after his sports career, he returned to Jablanica to create a better ambience for living. Creating a dozen jobs at the hydro plant would be just a beginning. Teletović says that dissatisfied villagers don't understand this. They, on the other hand, say that investors have never told them anything about the project.

In the beginning of 2014, Eko-Vat persuaded representatives of Jablanica 2 to support construction of the small hydro plant. Minutes from the meeting of the local community's council read that the project got support. Samir Sarajlić and four members of the local community's council signed them. The council's members nowadays say that the project was presented to them in a hurry, and that later they asked Sarajlić to organize a new meeting where they could learn about the details.

"Meeting did not take place here in Jeličići, as far as I know, nor in Zlate with regard to the building of that small hydro," says Ibrahim Spahić from Jelačići settlement who is one of the council representatives in Jablanica 2. "We were just called in to undersign."

The representative of Gornja Kolonija 1 settlement, Adis Teletović, says that to this day he's not sure if he gave his approval, because they were told that they were signing a letter of support, while Mustafa Tašić from Zlate settlement said that he could not remember what it was that he signed.

"Frankly, I have no idea if I signed something or that I know about it," said Tašić.

Council President Sarajlić disagrees. He told CIN that the everyone in Jablanica knew that small hydro plants were going to be built.

"There was nothing hidden and everything was in line with procedures and rules," he said. Sarajlić added that he would have given his support to the project again and denies the villagers' accusations that he did not want to convene a meeting and that he signed off on the project on his own.

According to the charter of the Jablanica municipality, residents decide on issues of importance for life and work in their local communities through public conventions and the Council. The local community's council has an obligation to consult residents before issuing a decision.

Since there was no convention in this case, residents had no opportunity to say what they think about the small hydro plant. They say they were fooled.

Emina Veljović, executive director of the association "Aarhus Center in BiH", an organization that protects the environment through legal actions, said that this was an example of a violation of the articles of Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. As a signatory country, BiH is obliged to respect it.

“Citizens did not have a chance to pore over the study; they did not have a chance to show their dissatisfaction in time in order that it could be taken into account in time,” says Veljović. “So that this could have an effect on stopping the issuing of environmental permit.” During 2015, the Teletovićs planned to build another small hydro, several kilometers upstream from Zlate. However, Doljani settlement residents rejected Eko-Vat’s plans at a convention. They objected to the proposed pipeline route which was to go through the settlements. The municipality issued a zoning approval which also encompassed private land. That’s why some land owners filed a case before the Cantonal Court in Mostar which has delayed the start of construction.

“No one has involved us in the procedure, no one asked us anything,” says Alija Tipura from Doljani. “Not only us, but many other landowners as well.”

Husein Rizvić, president of the Doljani community’s council, which includes several settlements, said that he presided over a convention because he wanted residents to have their say about the hydro plant. Earlier on, he agreed with Sarajlić that he would not sign off on the project without the residents’ approval. “He made a firm promise that he wouldn’t either. However, he accepted it wholeheartedly. He signed that they accept the project,” said Rizvić. “He did all of this without the approval and without the citizens’ convention. In my opinion, that’s ludicrous.”

Public Discussion for the Chosen Ones

Construction of Zlate continues even without the residents’ support. Eko-Vat got a concession permit. Then an environmental impact assessment was commissioned based on which the FBiH Ministry for Environment and Tourism issues an environmental permit. In the beginning of 2017, the convention on which the local residents were supposed to voice their opinion about the assessment took place.

According to the minutes, only 13 people attended, including Eko-Vat and the representatives of government institutions, as well as four residents from the settlements along the Doljanka, including the presidents of Jablanica 2 and Doljani local communities – Sarajlić and Rizvić.

Residents of Jablanica 2 community with whom reporters talked and the presidents of the Zlate and Jeličići branches say that they did not know about the convention so they did not have an opportunity to say what they think.

Sarajlić and Teletović disagree. They said that everyone was invited also via a local TV station and that the whole town knew that small hydro power plants were going to be built. Construction of Zlate continues even without the residents’ support. Eko-Vat got a

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