

According to the official website of the FG National Park, the law recognizes the entire Fruška Gora as a forest area, but due to the previous deforestation of the former 130,000 ha, only a fifth remained under the forest. The remaining forests, mostly covered by the boundaries of the national park, are mostly eroded by slopes. At the same time, Fruška gora is one of the last areas under natural forest in this part of the Pannonian plain. Of the 14 municipalities in which afforestation is below 1 percent and a total of less than 7 percent of the territory covered by forests, Vojvodina is the least forested area in Europe. To reach the level of 14 percent, which experts have been advocating for years, it lacks about 140,000 hectares of forest. (Forests and tree-lined avenues are of irreplaceable importance as windbreaks and in preserving the quality of agricultural land. Without them, up to 40 percent of soil quality can be lost due to the effects of aeolian erosion because the wind removes the best layers. Experts The strategic documents that were subsequently adopted, which prescribed the increase of afforestation from the then 6.5 to the required 14 percent, remained a dead letter on paper, and the volume of felling increased throughout the province and the republic.)

Vojvodina has not always been so poor in natural forests. Once widespread floodplain forests along rivers have been replaced by a huge percentage of arable land and tree plantations intended for the wood processing industry from the middle of the twentieth century until today. The Tisza area, for example, has lost 100 percent of its former floodplain, and as early as 2002, 45 percent of the province's forests were hybrid tree plantations. The disappearance and replacement of natural forests by monoculture plantations has far-reaching negative consequences: from disturbance of local biodiversity, disappearance of ecosystems, disturbance of ecological corridors, to increase in the frequency of floods and droughts. That is why Vojvodina is also one of the areas in which the greatest negative consequences of climate change are predicted, in which every forest and every tree should be protected.

The incomprehensible and unreasonable extent of felling trees on Fruška gora initiated in 2019 a gathering of those interested in protecting the local ecosystem in the movement Let's Defend the Forests of Fruška gora (OŠFG), which numbers about ten thousand people on social networks. Their analysis of the planning documents confirmed that the impressions from the field are not deceiving and that it is really a matter of large-scale cutting. Namely, between 50 and 60 thousand cubic meters of trees are cut down annually on Fruška. The choice of units of measure, activists point out, indicates that the forest is primarily seen as an industrial resource, and not as an integral element of the environment, the basis of a complex ecosystem, home to numerous endemic species, stabilizer of terrain

and water regime, oxygen source.

Church and National Park vs. National Park

In an effort to prevent devastation, members of the OFFG movement have been analyzing the combination of actors involved in deforestation for two years now. They determined through illegal actions and filed fifteen inspection reports, of which the judiciary reacted to several by imposing sanctions. However, the most worrying fact is that a good part of what at first glance seems like an uncontrolled element – which could be prevented by timely inspections – is carried out in a planned manner, under the auspices of state institutions and in accordance with (poorly set) laws.

The organizations that profit the most from the felling are the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the Public Company National Park Fruška Gora (JPNPFG). Namely, in 2009, sixteen monasteries of the Serbian Orthodox Church entered into possession of as much as 23 percent of the area of the National Park, ie as much as 6,000 hectares of forest, through restitution. According to the activists, as a private owner, the church started managing the forest when the valid Basics of Forest Management were adopted in 2016, a document on the basis of which the plans for felling were approved. Since then, the slopes have unstoppably turned into barrenness. The second and completely unexpected culprit is only the Public Company NP Fruška gora. Activists state that it is partly forced to act as an economic entity because it is defined as a self-financing organization. Namely, the state covers only 6 percent of the company's costs, while over 60 percent is financed from logging, and the rest from fees for the use of the protected nature area. The main responsibility, however, lies with the state, according to activists, ie decision-makers, who have declared protected areas, and at the same time set a bad management model and financing model.

According to the law, the forests of Fruška gora belong to special purpose forests, which should be managed differently than commercial forests, giving priority to their ecological and social over economic function. This should be recognized in the main document that prescribes what to do with which forest, the already mentioned Basics of Forest Management. The basics of management are issued by the Forest Administration at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management. To b

If approved, prior consent to the same document is given by the Provincial Institute for Nature Protection. "In this step", points out the activist Dragana Arsić from OŠFG, "there is a paradox that the institution whose main activity is to protect nature and to implement the Law on Nature Protection and the Law on National Parks is the same one that gave its

consent to this scope ”.

As for the hierarchy of power and personal responsibility of individual actors, legal loopholes, loopholes in the laws and non-cooperation of the work of institutions stand in the way of their disclosure. For example, when the OFSHG informed the public at the end of April that they had managed to at least partially unravel the complex of people involved in deforestation owned by the Fruška Gora monasteries, the announcement stated that they obtained the data thanks to the intervention of the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance, which JPNPFG denied them information. In this particular case, it was determined that the founder and first owner of the company “Šume Fruške gora”, which the Serbian Orthodox Church (ie the Diocese of Srem) engaged in “forest cutting and cultivation”, is no less than the head of the department for planning and sustainable forestry development the mentioned Forest Administration, in the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management. At the end of last year, “Šume Fruške gora” passed into the hands of the majority owner of the company “Strugara Radanović” – which, again, was one of the largest wholesale buyers of JPNPFG in 2020.

In the same hand and meter and scissors

In order for the forest to be treated in practice as a protected good, and not as a natural resource in the service of the wood processing industry, and to prevent abuses on Fruška gora (and other protected areas), radical changes in legislation in the field of nature protection and national park management are necessary. More efficient legal protection of forests and more efficient application of the law were therefore demanded at the protest called the Ecological Uprising. It is a mass gathering that was organized by several dozen environmental organizations in Belgrade a month ago in order to draw attention to the catastrophic situation in the field of environmental protection in Serbia.

Changes in the relevant legislation and planning documentation are underway: this week, the public inspection of the Draft Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia (PPRS), which will be valid until 2035, was completed, and the Law on Nature Protection will be changed soon. In addition, in recent months, representatives of the current authorities have increasingly declaratively advocated for the improvement of environmental protection, which is in line with Serbia’s activities to meet EU requirements from the negotiating Chapter 27. However, activists and experts estimate that new laws and plans lay the groundwork for improving the situation in this area, but they could also make it worse. They believe that the new documents give a clear priority to the extractive economy in relation to environmental protection. As Arsić explains, the Draft PPRS is strategically based on the development of

Serbia on the exploitation of natural resources. According to the draft, even protected nature areas have been put in the function of economic development, despite all international conventions to which Serbia is a signatory and in sharp contradiction with the obligations under Chapter 27.

From the Association for Forest Protection, the partner organization of the movement Let's Defend the Forests of Fruška Gora, draw attention to the controversial points of the Draft PPRS concerning the strategy of forestry development planning. The new spatial plan thus (sic!) Doubles the area of forests in the Republic planned for felling: instead of the annual volume of 2.4 million cubic meters of wood mass, 4.7 million is envisaged. This data is astonishing, especially when supplemented by the knowledge that the planned level of afforestation in the past years has not been even close to being realized, ie that out of the planned 4,000 hectares, only about twenty percent are afforested annually. The draft PPRS plans afforestation of 6,000 ha per year, which could not replace the lost areas even if realized, and which, in addition, does not protect the biodiversity of endangered areas. The forested areas, namely, include industrial plantations that have dramatically different characteristics from old forests. As Sasa Rajkov, an ecologist from the Novi Sad Center for Biodiversity Research, recently explained to CINS: "The order of hybrid poplars has the same ecosystem structure as the poles along the street."

"Development Brakes"

A group of over seventy environmental organizations these days demanded an extension of the Public Insight into the extensive Draft PPRS. They submitted objections to the disputed points of the draft Law on Nature Protection and asked for its withdrawal from the procedure. Interestingly, the Republic Institute for Nature Protection also submitted objections to the draft law. Only a few days after that, the director of the Institute was - significantly - replaced. The interested public recognized this shift as a method of putting pressure on undesirable "development brakes".

OSFG members have also been facing various types of pressure since their movement was founded in early 2019. Dragana Arsić, a public figure of the movement, testified that in August and September 2020 she was the target of a strong negative media campaign. is, because of which she finally sued the portals that discredited and untrue her. The intensification of the attack is connected with the moment when the OFFG, by submitting one of the last inspection reports, touched the wasp's nest of interesting connections of politicians, influential businessmen and employees in security institutions. (The reason for the report was the construction of a concrete road on the Fruška Gora hill Kesten, as well as

fencing the entire hill with a massive wire fence and blocking public uncategorized roads that have traditionally been used for hundreds of years. This process awaits its epilogue, as the construction inspection ordered the removal of the road, but the investor filed a complaint with the Provincial Government.)

The OSFG states that they will not succumb to pressure. They demand a ten-year moratorium on deforestation on Fruška Gora, changes in legislation and resignations in relevant institutions, and, as they say, investigate further “because institutions must be publicly confronted with illegal activities and lawlessness that they avoid and tolerate.” by the relentless felling of the Fruška Gora forest, satire. ”

Source: bilten.org