

In March 2019, the Republika Srpska and Serbia agreed to cooperate on the construction of the Buk Bijela plant, besides already agreed joint projects on hydropower plants at Foca and Paunci on the Drina river. Buk Bijela will be the largest and most important of the three hydro power plants, with a dam length of almost 200 meters, a height of 57 metres and an artificial lake measuring 11.5 kilometres.

After a joint session of the Serbian government and the government of the Bosnian Serb entity, Republika Srpska, in East Sarajevo, the two prime ministers, Ana Brnabic and Radovan Viskovic, laid the foundation stone for the construction of a hydro plant that environmentalists have condemned as a threat to the river Drina.

Non-governmental organisations and river sports enthusiasts have slated plans to build three dams on the upper stretch of the Drina in Bosnia, saying the river should be protected. The Drina and its tributaries are the most important habitat for the globally endangered Danube Salmon and an increasingly popular outdoor tourist destination.

“An adequate environmental impact study has not been conducted. The study was done more than 10 years ago with data that are more than 30 years old and as such, it should not be subject to approval,” Viktor Bjelic, from the Centre for the Environment, an NGO from Banja Luka, said.

Reacting to the protests, Brnabic said the project had been awaited for more than three decades and it was important as the power would be renewably sourced.

“It is important because it is electricity from renewable sources,” Brnabic told a press conference after the joint government session, adding that thermal power plants need replacing.

“Everything has an impact on the environment and I think that care should be taken to keep that impact as small as possible,” Brnabic said.

Although the Drina forms part of Bosnia’s state border with Montenegro and Serbia, no consent has been sought from Bosnian state institutions to build the plants.

In December 2020, 24 members of Bosnia’s House of Representatives launched a constitutional court case against Republika Srpska’s decision to issue a concession for the construction of the Drina hydropower plants, saying decisions on state property such as rivers on international borders can only be taken at the state level.

However, Radovan Viskovic, the RS Prime Minister insisted that the construction of the dam was not in the competence of the state but of Republika Srpska, and, based on that, the Serbian government had nothing to discuss with Bosnia, but only with Republika Srpska. Despite that, Bisera Turkovic, Bosnia’s Foreign Minister, warned Serbia that it was risking damaging inter-state relations.

Despite opposition from environmental organizations, works start on disputed HPP in Bosnia

“The Serbian authorities must know that, by entering the Buk Bijela project, which has no state consent and opposes decisions made by Bosnia’s Constitutional Court, they risk not only economic damage but also do not contribute to good neighbourly relations,” she said. However, Brnabic said Serbia was not interfering but only investing in Bosnia. “We are investing and our investment is protected. We have done an analysis and ... if it turns out that our investment is uncertain, then it would be extremely bad,” she said.

A case about Buk Bijela dam is also pending at the Espoo Convention Implementation Committee due to Bosnia’s failure to consult Montenegro about the environmental impacts of the upper Drina hydropower plants. A group of NGOs submitted a complaint to the Committee in May 2020, as did the Montenegrin government in December 2020.

Source: balkaninsight.com