

## **Over 2,700 small hydroelectric plants are planned or under construction in the region**

Activists across the Western Balkans are protesting the construction of small hydroelectric power plants which experts say threaten the environment and freshwater sources. More than 2,700 small hydroelectric plants are either planned or under construction in North Macedonia, Bosnia- Herzegovina, Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, and Croatia.

The Balkan countries have turned to hydropower in the haste to meet targets set by the Energy Community Treaty, an agreement between the European Union and its neighbors by which signatories must, among other things, obtain 27 percent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2020.

But critics say governments are rushing construction without properly assessing its environmental impacts — and that projects are marred in corruption.

A 2017 study by Bankwatch, a network of civil society organizations from Central and Eastern Europe, visited eight European-financed hydropower plants in the region and discovered that all of them are in protected areas or ecologically-sensitive areas. They found that most plants have caused river beds to dry and hindered local villages' water sources. Field visits to plants in North Macedonia in 2017 found that construction materials dumped in the riverbed have disrupted the migration of fish and other organisms. The study says: "All of the plants visited are in urgent need of increased impact monitoring as well as restoration measures. In most of the cases flagrant violations of national laws and international financial institutions' standards are visible."

Macedonian biologist Ana Colovic Lesoska, from local NGO Eko-svest, expressed concern about the trend in a statement for Global Voices:

"All water bodies are invaluable to us. The survival of the rivers depends not only upon the survival of the ecosystems they run through but also on the survival of the local population that depends on them for food and water. Destruction of rivers means the silent destruction of all villages and settlements along with traditions and history."

Colovic recently won the Goldman environmental prize for her efforts in stopping two large dams being constructed in the Mavrovo National Park, home to the endangered Balkan Lynx.

The Bankwatch report also found that, all over the region, companies that won concessions to construct and operate small hydropower plants are owned either by politicians in power or their relatives. The report says:

“North Macedonia’s Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Kocho Angjushev owns at least 27 small hydropower plants, and the president of the main opposition party, Hristijan Mickoski also holds at least five concessions. In Serbia, companies connected to Nikola Petrović, the best man (kum) of President Aleksandar Vučić, are among the top beneficiaries of hydropower support.”

In North Macedonia, locals from the village of Zhirovnica, with the help of civil society organizations, won a legal battle this year against two power plants in the Mavrovo municipality. Local authorities canceled their construction after concluding they had failed to comply with international and national regulations.

In neighboring Kosovo, protests against hydroelectric plants have united local Serb and Albanian residents of the municipality of Štrpce, on the Šar Mountain near the Macedonian border. Since mid-2018, they have staged a series of protests at the construction site. On October 8, one of those protests was met with excessive force by the national police, who used pepper spray on attendants, including children, and left 20 injured. Three residents of the nearby Lower Biti village were arrested and released after questioning.

The bridging of ethnic divides in a country that was ravaged by ethnic cleansing only twenty years ago has attracted the attention of regional media attention. One article from August 2019 was titled “Štrpce: An ethnic Serb and an ethnic Albanian arrested for burning bulldozers.” A similar story was also published by BBC in Serbian.

Most of the energy in the Western Balkans comes from coal. In 2018, only 3.8 percent of the region’s electricity was generated by hydropower dams. All of the countries have high solar potential, but only one percent of the region’s capacity has been installed.

Source: [globalvoices.org](http://globalvoices.org)