

The Vjosa in southern Albania is the last free-flowing river in Europe and is crucial to thousands of livelihoods. But the Balkan frenzy over hydropower threatens the future of the entire valley.

There is a strange melody to the banks of the Vjosa – at once peaceful and chaotic. The rumble of the water is followed by the jingle of goat bells. And then there's a bleating – not just from the animals themselves, but also from the shepherd Kadri.

"He's trying to make them sing!" laughs Eduart, another shepherd who brings his goats to drink here every day. For as long as the valley's residents can remember, the wind has carried this soothing cacophony from one bank of the river to the other.

Kadri and Eduart were born in Kutë, a centuries-old hamlet cradled in the hills of the Vjosa valley. Most residents of Kutë and other villages near the river are farmers who live off their crops and livestock and sell the surplus for profit.

But this ancient way of life could soon be over.

Flamingos and eels

Two large hydropower plants are planned in the nearby towns of Kalivaç and Poçem. If they are built, dams will flood thousands of acres of pasture and arable land, forcing hundreds of families from their homes.

"I am very afraid because I know nothing other than taking care of the goats," Kadri told DW. "The dam will change our lives, it will change everything."

It would also disrupt the last, large, free-flowing river system in Europe, outside the Arctic. The Vjosa runs some 270 kilometers (168 miles), from the mountains of northern Greece, across the lush plains of southern Albania, and into the Ionian Sea. It's dotted with canyons, islands and oxbows that give the area its moniker, "the blue heart of Europe."

As well as an essential source of water for water agriculture, it is also a biodiversity hotspot, home to the endangered European eel and greater flamingo.

Scientists say it may host a number of other endemic species. No in-depth biological survey has ever been conducted and building the dams would prevent scientists from ever studying the habitat as an untamed waterway.

Balkan hydropower fever

Across the Balkan region, an estimated 2,700 hydroelectric plants are planned or already under construction. According to a December 2015 report by finance watchdog Bankwatch, about half these projects are in protected natural areas.

Environmental group EcoAlbania has identified 45 hydropower plant projects along the Vjosa that would transform sections of the river into cascades, disrupting ecosystems and forcing thousands of people into exodus.

Many of the projects date back to a wave of concessions for small hydropower plants issued in the 2000s, partly in response to the EU's burgeoning interest in renewable energy. According to Bankwatch's Pippa Gallop, "it was also a new opportunity for shady deals, speculation and nepotism, spotted by local elites, as feed-in tariffs guarantee an income for small hydropower plants."

Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina issued particularly high numbers of concessions between 2006 and 2009.

The region is plagued with corruption. And while rules on financial support for renewable energy have been updated in the EU, the Western Balkans still lag behind on reform.

In a bid to boost the share of renewables in their portfolios and demonstrate commitment to the "green energy transition," western European funds - including international development banks - are taking advantage of this.

Historic lawsuit

Olsi Nika, executive director of EcoAlbania, says wealthier European countries are taking liberties with ecological standards in "countries with weak legal frameworks, where democracy levels are low and corruption is high."

Hydropower is touted as a cheaper alternative to solar or wind power. But Nika says this doesn't account for environmental costs.

"Hydropower is renewable but it's not green," he told DW. "And the way it's being done, especially in the Balkans, is definitely not environmentally friendly."

Civil society organizations have had some success challenging hydropower projects in protected areas. Last May a court ruled against the construction of the hydropower plant in Poçem, in Albanian's first ever environmental lawsuit.

But the battle is far from over. The energy ministry appealed the decision. And, just a few weeks later, it launched a new open call for investors in the second dam, planned in Kalivaç.

Source: dw