

Lejla Kusturica, activist and director of the Atelier for Social Change – ACT Foundation, which is part of the Coalition for the Protection of Rivers in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), talks about the protection of rivers in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Coalition for the Protection of Rivers of BiH has gathered numerous organizations with a common goal, which is the protection of one of our greatest natural resources, water and rivers. This struggle has been going on for ten years. And there comes a moment when a kind of breakthrough happens. I think that 2020 is exactly the year when our struggle was crowned in some way. We almost reached the goal. But we are very careful. The laws and legal acts have not been finally changed yet, I am talking about the Federation of BiH, where we have worked intensively. Parliament said in June that small hydropower plants should be banned. A lot of activists protected rivers with their bodies, we joined forces, we got international support, and that led to certain results. We are still waiting for the final ban, laws, bylaws, by which we will be able to tell investors that the construction of small hydropower plants is no longer possible, it is not legal in this country.

We had a government that favored investors and all laws and bylaws were tailored to protect the interests of investors, not the interests of citizens. And the rivers really belong to all of us. On the other hand, there was our campaign, the long struggle of activists, protests in front of the Federation Government. All this eventually led to a meeting with the Prime Minister and other ministers in charge of this issue. We had a complete turnaround, when the federal prime minister stated that small hydropower plants are harmful, that they are not energy efficient. We then submitted a list of short-term, medium-term and long-term measures to protect the rivers. Certain requirements were related to the change of regulations at the level of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, which would regulate the issuance of environmental permits, if it were no longer distributed between the cantons and the Federation, popularly speaking, it is not known who drinks, who pays. One of the more significant demands was the abolition of incentives for small hydropower plants. All regulations are at some stage of change. We recently had a meeting with the Minister of Energy, Nermin Dzindic, who said that the incentives would be abolished, that is a promise. We want to revise all permits for small hydropower plants that have been issued, not only planned but also built, to be put in order, because now nothing is respected, neither the biological minimum, nor the fish paths, our rivers are drying up because it is allowed. to build 109 small hydropower plants. We cannot demolish them, but we can put them in order, those who cannot work properly, we will direct all our strength to be extinguished. In the long run, we really want water, as the most valuable wealth in BiH, to be constitutionally protected. We hope to make progress in Republika Srpska as well. Rivers

know no borders, a river that runs through the whole country cannot be half protected, half unprotected. We in the Coalition are very united, we work together in the whole of BiH. We will definitely have a focus on the RS Government next year.

We follow the case, we support colleagues who defend the rivers, in this case most intensively Bjelava, where suspicious actions take place, where the RS police launched an investigation for forging the signatures of landowners through which the route for a small hydropower plant passes. It is so much the strength of investors, in conjunction with the authorities, the neglect of the general interest that it is terrible.

People will not give up, precisely because there is complete awareness among the large population, and it seems to me that number is growing, that water is life, and that by defending rivers we are defending life, our first home. Without forests, without rivers we have no air, we have no water, no life. Life in this country is difficult anyway due to difficult social and economic conditions. The only thing left for people to do is to use nature in a sustainable way and to have the basic preconditions for life, but even that has been attacked. We came to the red line when people say they could go no longer. I hope that other changes in society will start from the rivers so that everyone can live with dignity. I must say that the greatest merit of the founder of the Atelier Foundation for Social Change ACT, within which I also work, her name is Marsela Pecanac, a woman from Sarajevo living in America, an environmental activist. She lives far away due to a combination of circumstances, but she has never given up on her country. She is helping the Coalition for the Protection of Rivers, and recently decided to found the Foundation. The two of us have joined forces, working together. In America, she tried, and it was very successful, to reach as many environmental organizations as possible, to tell the story, because the healthy nature of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a piece of planet Earth is important for the whole world. The struggle to protect rivers has been recognized as globally important for the salvation of Europe's last free-flowing rivers. Support was provided by well-known environmental activists, such as actor Leonardo di Caprio. The campaign was globally supported by over 25 international, the largest environmental organizations in the world, with a membership of over 30 million. That support, which is very important, is still going on. They are with us, following this case and saying: 'Government of the Federation, Government of Republika Srpska, the whole world is watching you!'.

I was on the river Kolina, in the eastern part of BiH where a small hydro power plant, 'Jabuka', was built, in a village where there are not many locals. I couldn't believe my eyes that someone built a small hydro plant there. It is actually a rich stream, 30 inches wide. When we talk about the investment logic and the logic of all those who favored them these

last ten, fifteen years, gave them permits, created a structure within which they could literally destroy the watercourses on which the locals depend, when someone threatened it then really, every stream, river in BiH it is endangered. We must persevere in the fight to stop the destruction. And they are all endangered until they are defended. To be defended, we must all breathe together as one and oppose destruction, which I think has become clear to the public and citizens. The movement is becoming more and more massive. However, we did not reach the goal.

Life in BiH is very difficult, our people live in almost impossible conditions, there are so many problems. As an activist, I had the opportunity to work with various groups, with children, with women, with young people. The number of problems that every man in this country faces, except for a handful of privileged people, who act as if they are the rulers of this country, is huge. It is the duty of all of us who deal with a topic to tell people in an accessible way what the problem is and then invite them to provide support in a realistic and possible way. I am especially glad that the support is growing. The amount of messages we get on the FB page of the ACT Foundation for Social Change is huge, people are finding various ways to get involved. Recently a gentleman contacted me and said; 'I can't do much, but I would like to pay five marks for lunch to one of the activists on the ground. I want to be a part of that struggle. ' And he really paid five marks. Indeed, it can be said that the country is saved and loved with five marks. There are three million of us. Imagine that half of the population to five marks. Or five minutes, or five hours. Indeed, time is money. Everyone can give something. And I am glad that this movement manages to engage all people.

Source: slobodnaevropa.org