

Slovenian Government wants to widen the list of facilities that can be built in ecologically sensitive areas, including amusement parks, parking lots and hotels as well as garages and warehouses.

On July 1, Slovenia took over the EU presidency for the next six months. The government of populist prime minister Janez Janša is officially proclaiming that it will work to accelerate the green transition in Europe and is scheduled to host EU environmental ministers in Slovenia later this month.

However, Janša's government has introduced legislation that would allow for commercial development in coastal areas, thereby endangering surface and groundwater quality. These planned changes put the safety of Slovenia's drinking water at severe risk.

I am part of a grassroots movement of young people that is standing up to Janša, campaigning against the changes of Slovenia's Waters Act and the lowering of environmental safeguards.

Apart from endangering the safe supply of drinking water, if implemented, these changes would result in less access to water for Slovenians as private developers could claim the land. One reportedly planned mega-development is a water sports recreation center in the municipality of Brežice, where environment minister Andrej Vizjak hails from. The law would also potentially endanger communities as it could threaten flood protections by allowing construction in flood plains. Under the proposed legislation the budget for the maintenance of river beds would no longer be ring-fenced, which in practice would mean that fewer funds will be available for river protection, flood safety, and ensuring clean drinking water. The government is planning to scrap the very environmental protections that countries like France and Austria are now trying to emulate in order to protect their coastlines. The government is introducing these and other changes potentially harming the environment, claiming to boost the economy after the Covid-19 pandemic. Our grassroots campaign "For drinking water" has managed to collect over 50,000 signatures all over the country, forcing the government to hold a referendum on the amendments to the Waters Act on Sunday (July 11). This campaign, coordinated by my organization the Institute of the 8th March, is built by the people for the people, involving 19 NGOS, including Greenpeace Slovenia, and many local organizations across the country. We will continue our campaign until the last minute. Our volunteers will write letters to their neighbors, explaining the dangers of this new law and urging them to vote 'no' on July 11. More than 450 volunteers have helped us across the country, including a group of high school students who raised awareness among retirees.

Successful precedent on rape laws

Our successful campaign to strengthen Slovenia's rape law, which redefines sexual consent in line with the "only yes means yes" concept, has shown that grassroots mobilization can make a change.

On 4 June, Slovenia became only the 13th country in Europe to change its legal definition of rape to a consent-based one. Amnesty International, which was part of the campaign, called the legislative change "a historic victory for women in Slovenia".

While the Institute of the 8th March mainly focuses on women's rights issues, I strongly believe that the feminist struggle is also an environmental one.

There is no isolated fight. Together we need to fight against all sorts of inequalities. That is why we partnered up with environmental groups to coordinate volunteers across the country. Every Friday we are organizing protests in the capital Ljubljana against the government's actions violating human rights and attacking free speech.

Recent protests featured speeches denouncing the planned changes to the Waters Act. The protest before the July 11 referendum will focus on mobilizing voters to reject the government's plans.

Copying Orban?

In neighboring Hungary, we have seen how commercial development around key ecological sites like lakes is reportedly damaging the environment.

The pace of construction funded by well-connected private investors around Lake Balaton and other lakes in Hungary has accelerated significantly, prompting several environmental NGOs to launch the Great Lakes campaign in 2020.

In a declaration, the groups called on the government to ensure that Hungary's lakes do not fall victim to investments, which they say "only serve the short-term economic interests of a small group of investors and do not comply with the principles of sustainability".

Given Janša's fondness to emulate policies by his Hungarian counterpart Viktor Orbán, could Slovenia also go down this dangerous path? Janša's efforts to clamp down on independent media do not bode well.

We are confident that we can gather the necessary 340,000 votes to block this harmful law, but we need the support of the international community to safeguard our environment against the plans of the right-wing government.

The EU and the wider international community should put pressure on the Slovenian government to uphold environmental safeguards and guarantee the continued safe supply of drinking water. The consequences of inaction would be dire and deepen inequalities.



How is Slovenia undermining EU's environmental ambitions

Source: euobserver.com