

A North Macedonia State Audit Office report published Monday has found serious violations in the issuance of concessions for small hydropower plants, which calls into question the plants' legality. The audit, entitled '*Exploitation of water resources in electricity generation*' has been welcomed by NGOs Eko-Svest and the Macedonian Young Lawyers' Association. The report confirms that the national development strategies for energy and the use of renewable sources, on the basis of which most of the concessions have been issued, were developed without a strategic environmental impact assessment.

The tendering commissions have not conducted the legally required concession studies or preliminary environmental impact assessments. For some of the tenders there was no feasibility study and no final decision to carry out a tender procedure.

Water usage has even been allowed without a water permit in some cases. The competent ministry's data on applications for such permits is incomplete, as is the data on the permits issued. All of the plants received permits without the legally required site inspections being done.

*"The State Audit Office report confirms what we have been repeating for years: that the procedure for construction of small hydropower plants neglects legal obligations for environmental protection. This leads to them being permitted without proper determination of their environmental impacts, with catastrophic consequences for the environment and the local population,"* said Gjorgji Mitrevski, coordinator for community support at Eko-Svest.

This is exacerbated by the fact that investors rarely adhere to the environmental measures prescribed in their permits, and by the environmental inspectorate's lack of capacity. Bojan Trpevski from the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association added that *"Failure to conduct an environmental impact assessment when awarding concessions for small hydropower plants prevents the effective implementation of the public participation principle. The public was not given the opportunity to express its views when awarding concessions for the plants, nor could the institutions effectively assess their harmful impact on the environment and the protective measures that the investor should have taken."*

*"We will continue to use all available legal mechanisms for environmental protection, but based on the State Audit Office's findings, we expect the government to review the legality of the existence of the small hydropower plants and to determine responsibility for this deliberate neglect of the legal provisions for the protection of our rivers,"* he added.

Source: exit.al