

## Montenegrin shepherds fight to preserve their traditional lands from NATO land grab in Montenegro

The military ground is being built on 7,500 hectares in the heart of the UNESCO-recognized Tara River Biosphere Reserve. The area is also of cultural interest since it hosts numerous churches, monasteries and memorials. Two UNESCO World Heritage sites lie within the biosphere reserve, the Durmitor National Park, one of the oldest of the Balkans, and the carved limestone tombstones in graveyards dating back to the 12-16th centuries. Within the biosphere reserve live over 30,000 people, mostly engaged in agriculture, cattle breeding and grazing, to which Sinjajevina is vital.

While all eyes were focused on elections in the US, few noticed that a new government was to be sworn in Montenegro. Shepherds and villagers of the Sinjajevina-Durmitor mountain range, the biggest mountain grassland in the Balkans and second biggest in Europe, looked with hope to the new government as they are fighting to preserve their traditional lands and ways of life. A military training ground supported and fueled by NATO has been operating since 2019 on their lands, which for millennia have served as pasture to local communities living in the area.

In October 2020, as hundreds of NATO soldiers (Montenegro joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 2017) arrived to take over the area, local shepherds, villagers, environmental activists and rights groups gathered in large numbers to protest. They camped at the foot of Margita mountain, within the site earmarked for the army, and blocked soldiers' access to their pastures, serving as "human shields". Farmers also protested at the doors of Montenegro's parliament days earlier, when Olivér Várhelyi, the EU Commissioner in charge of enlargement, visited the country, urging the EU to suspend membership talks with Montenegro until it stops militarizing Sinjajevina.

Pastoralists were never consulted about the change in the use of their land, and most of them first heard of the training ground over radio. Customary rights granted to pasture lands by different royal decrees since the 1880s are still in place. Montenegro's pastoralism is part of an ancient tribal egalitarian social structure, with tribal organizations having been officially recognized since the beginning of the 20th century when their herds doubled the country's human population, indicating its strong pastoralist heritage. Changes over the last century have thinned out the population on the mountains. Even so, this area remains the best living example of the country's pastoralist past and is still well preserved ecologically. Protesters say the Constitution of Montenegro has been violated by the lack of consultation with local communities. There are also international environment laws like the UN Aarhus Convention, to which Montenegro is party, that have been violated by the decision to build a military site on these highly biodiverse grasslands preserved over generations by local communities.

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The use of explosives in the area, shooting bullets and testing rockets, is bound to cause irreparable damage to flora, fauna, water streams and the ecology. But what is worse, irreparable harm would also be done to the sustained pastoral use of these immense ecosystems whose plants and animals directly depend on it to prevail, as they have co-evolved with pastoralism for millennia and today form a symbiosis. Without pastoralism they would be lost forever.

Shockingly, the environmental, health or socio-economic impacts of this military ground have not yet been estimated, despite it already being officially declared and inaugurated. Evictions are possible, and nobody even knows if their lands fall within the limits of the training ground or not, since this information has not been made public. The democratically elected coalition that is trying to form the new Government in Montenegro has expressed support for the protesters even if it is not yet clear what solution it is proposing. The citizens' gathering in Sinjajevina against the military ground was set to last until 11th November, the date when the new government was supposed to take office and which had raised hopes of avoiding a planned military training exercise with harmful and toxic explosives.

But a new announcement has been made postponing the formation of the new Government to December 2nd, which pushes citizens to an even more extreme situation in which they face a double challenge. First, the pressure from the state in resisting the entrance of the military that might be imminent - the outgoing Minister of the Defense surprisingly insists on going ahead the training exercise. Second, the pressure of staying in the area 20 more days than expected, with temperatures currently several degrees Celsius below zero, many people ill after 28 days resisting at almost 2,000 metres above sea level, and even worse weather conditions expected in the coming days.

However, in a spontaneous reaction, great numbers of citizens all around the country, as well as the highest ranks of the Serbian Orthodox Church, have been standing with the protesters, regularly visiting them in the grasslands. At the same time, the army has been visiting residents of the area, asking them to leave and remove their animals. Surveillance has continued, and helicopters fly overhead, intimidating residents, while the police are also patrolling. A campaign has now come together under the name 'Save Sinjajevina'. In a press release issued at the time the camp was starting, local villagers and activists said, "We are ready to die for our mountain". They said they "would fight to the death against the Army's attempt at land-grab, and will prevent the poisoning and killing of their mountain".

"The approximately 250 families living up on the top of the highlands of Sinjajevina are at risk of losing their livelihoods by losing their customary rights to pasture and farmland,

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their access to non-timber forest products such as honey and medicinal plants, as well as their homes. The food security of up to 22,000 people in the surrounding area could be affected by contamination of the water, food and animal fodder in the area. Protecting the area is paramount for the survival of local culture and identity, for the livelihoods of the population but also for the conservation of biodiversity and local ecosystems that have co-evolved and are dependent on the practice of pastoralism," Save Sinjajevina said in a statement.

Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of NATO, issued a statement, claiming "Nature must be protected and armed forces must carry out military exercise", but not giving any indication how the two aims could be met at this location. At the same time, this seems to contradict the Montenegro National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2016-2020, in which Sinjajevina was to be declared a regional park for the protection of nature and culture by 2020.

The Montenegrin state is fully conscious of Sinjajevina's enormous cultural and natural value, and so is the EU, as an extensive study was completed recently in support of Sinjajevina's recognition as a protected area. The effort to create a natural park in Sinjajevina began in December 2013, with a project co-funded by the European Union. The EU covered 67% of the total budget of €290,494.47, and the rest was provided by the Montenegrin state. All that work and public money now seems to be have gone nowhere. Moreover, in 2016, a part of Sinjajevina was declared an Important Plant Area, as well as an EMERALD site under the Bern Convention a little later. At the same time, this region is proposed as an area of special interest for the protection of birds, which would come into force once Montenegro joins the European Union in the form of a Natura 2000 area. In fact, this military ground has been inaugurated in the heart of the region with the greatest density of protection figures in the country.

As the winter deepens, protesters too are growing weary and have called for solidarity from the international community. After all, a unique ecology is not one nation's heritage alone. This is the wealth of all our people, of generations still to come.

Source: [opendemocracy.net](http://opendemocracy.net)