

Small hydropower plants also threaten pristine nature in Montenegro – and are built there by private companies with state subsidies. The young are leading the protests against the construction and have also dragged senior citizens.

The Bukovica River in the north of Montenegro is crystal clear. Its icy water can be drunk directly from the fast stream and that is why Bukovica means life for all residents of the surrounding villages. In addition, its bed is the habitat of an endemic brown trout species and a unique flower named after the river.

Montenegro is a mountainous country known for its wild rivers. However, small hydropower plants threaten this pristine nature. They are built by private companies with the help of state subsidies. Since 2013, 14 plants have been built in Montenegro and 55 more are planned. The government says the construction of dams will help the country switch to renewable energy.

However, young Montenegrin activists are voting against their construction. They claim that mini hydropower plants do irreparable damage to the environment, rivers, and their unique flora and fauna. “Youth movements play an important role in organizing protests for the protection of rivers from Montenegro to Serbia,” says Dragana Mileusnic of The Nature Conservancy, which is responsible for the region of Southeast Europe.

In a country with a population of 620,000, even small youth movements can have a huge impact, says activist Aleksandar Dragicevic, who is involved in the fight against the construction of a small hydroelectric power plant (SHPP) in a small community near the Bukovica River. The water of that river was placed in a pipe for more than eight kilometers, and in the place where once the crystal clear water flowed, now only an empty stone bed remained.

“People with their herds of cows and sheep depend on this river,” says 31-years old Dragicevic, “People swim here. They grew up with her, fishing here. For them, it’s like someone came to take something for them.”

Building permit without environmental impact assessment

The municipality of Savnik is situated between the steep mountains, next to the Durmitor National Park in the northwest of Montenegro. The small village of Bukovica is home to 200 people, often less during the snowy winter months. In May this year, construction workers and two excavators arrived in the small town, and a small office was set up – a big surprise for the locals. All this is the property of an investor, Hydra MNE, a new consortium that

wants to produce electricity.

According to a survey by Montenegrin authorities, 98 percent of residents previously opposed the construction of a small hydropower plant in the site, for which there was no environmental impact assessment. Still, the company received state approval to begin operations, and the surrounding trees were cut down to clear the path to the river. Residents soon began protests. They raised money for a lawyer, but the government dismissed all the complaints, Dragicevic recalls. Communities in the surrounding areas then joined the protests. Hundreds of protesters strapped on construction machinery and camped there.

“They did it in shifts, always in groups of 10 to 15 people, for six weeks [from May to June 2019], until the Minister of Economic Affairs came and promised that the machines would stop working until the government reconsidered the case,” says Dragicevic.

“If we had more young people, we would have fought easier”

Dragicevic is just one of many young people in Montenegro who are strongly committed to protecting the environment - in a country that many young people leave daily because they have no job.

In Kosovo and Montenegro, 8 out of 10 young people have temporary employment contracts. According to World Bank statistics, youth unemployment in the Balkans is 35 percent.

Milovan Markovic is 23 years old and comes from Montenegro. He had a desire to start a winery, but instead moved to Podgorica to look for a job there. It was important for him to work for the “right thing” and so he became interested in the non-governmental organization Ozon, which specializes in organizing environmental campaigns.

“If we young people want to stay in Montenegro, then we must fight for our country,” Markovic says. “Many of my friends have left because more money is being made abroad. I think if there were more young people here we could do better. ”

Markovic explains that the Ozone organization wants to make it easier for citizens to engage and activate. Young people sometimes inspire older people. “On the Bukovica River, several young activists mobilized seniors to prevent machines from destroying their river together,” says Mileusnic of The Nature Conservancy.

Fighting for the future

Construction work on the 42-kilometer-long Bukovica River has been suspended – but not finally stopped. Excavators and a small office are still in the same place.

Hydra MNE employees recently returned to the construction site and marked the surrounding trees. Residents suspect they have done so, as they will knock them down to complete their journey to the river. The government claims it is still in the process of checking the documents for the construction project and that will take some time.

Dragicevic, on the other hand, states that money is first and foremost more important to the state than nature protection. “We have a saying: Butcher a cow for a pound of meat. This means that the short-term benefit is more important than the long-term,” explains this activist.

Momcilo Blagojevic, director general of the Montenegrin Directorate for Water Management, claims that the authorities also think it is important to protect the rivers.

“Environmental protection is part of the Constitution and everything the authorities do is to protect the rivers and good water management.”

Blagojevic declined to speak about the endemic species of fish that lives in Bukovica, saying the impact small hydroelectric power plants have on Montenegrin rivers, saying his department has no review of this but local authorities.

For young activists, the battle for the rivers continues and is passed on to future generations. “We will need these rivers, and our children and their children will need them too,” Dragicevic says. “We are here to fight for the rivers and we will not leave.”

Hydra MNE, of which the DW team also sought comment, has not responded to the inquiry.

Source: dw.com