

Over three decades of neglect, Montenegro broke a promise to put the environment first. A new government has promised a change in course, but environmentalists are sceptical

Three decades since Montenegro became the first country in the world to declare itself an 'ecological state', the pledge it made today rings hollow, said prominent environmentalist Vuk Ikovic.

Montenegro made the declaration, later enshrined in its constitution, on September 20, 1991, just as socialist Yugoslavia was starting to unravel.

Three decades on, the country has little to show for it. A new government has promised a change in course, but Ikovic and others are unconvinced.

"It was a concept by which in 30 years we would become rich thanks to natural resources, our knowledge and our work. The opposite happened, and by abusing our knowledge we sold the best resources and brought ourselves to the brink," said Ikovic, a thirty-nine years old biologist and well-known civic activist. "Those who had knowledge have mostly left the country, while authorities continue to fill the budget through the insane use of land, forests and water."

The 1991 declaration, adopted in the northern town of Zabljak, was the work of the then ruling Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS, led then, and now, by current Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic.

In 1992, the Montenegrin Constitution was revised to define Montenegro as a "*democratic, social and ecological state*", while the declaration itself was presented at the United Nations conference on environmental protection.

The DPS spent the next three decades in power, but critics say care for the environment was never a priority. Instead, the party was accused of presiding over practically a feudal system of government, deeply corrupt and determined to exploit the country's rivers and coastline at all cost.

"The key environmental problem of Montenegro is the plunder of natural resources and the distorted system that legalizes that plunder," said Ikovic, one of the founders of the Podgorica-based KOD civic movement. "The authorities are protecting nature in political campaigns, but unfortunately for most of them the cement mixer is still the symbol of development."

EU pressure

Last year, in its annual report on Montenegro's progress towards membership of the European Union, the European Commission warned the country needed to redouble its efforts in terms of waste management, water quality, nature protection and climate change. The country of 620,000 people began EU accession negotiations in June 2012, six

years after it narrowly voted in a referendum to end almost a century of a state union with Serbia.

In the almost nine years since, just three of 33 negotiating chapters have been completed. The process, however, could slow down environmental destruction in Montenegro, Ikovic said.

“The European Union wants an organized and clean Montenegro,” he said. “But every country should have a safe supply of drinking water, nature protection and wastewater treatment, regardless of the requirements of the EU. In order to have this, we need to invest in administrative and judicial capacities”.

As one of the biggest environmental issues, the European Commission cited air pollution in the northern town of Pljevlja, the site of Montenegro’s only coal-fired power plant.

Last year, a deal was signed with a consortium led by China’s Dongfang Electric International Corporation to refurbish the power plant and reduce its emissions in line with EU standards.

“In Pljevlja, every fifth infant death is attributed to air pollution,” Ikovic said. “It’s assumed that air pollution causes respiratory diseases in every third child. In Pljevlja, due to air pollution, the lifespan is shorter by three and a half years, but the officials still fear that if we shut down the thermal power plant, we will enter an even bigger economic crisis.”

The new government, old environmental problems

Montenegro’s current government, backed by an uneasy alliance of three blocs that narrowly edged the DPS from power in an election in August 2020, has promised to turn a new page in environmental protection.

In February this year, the government terminated concession contracts for seven hydro plants in the northern part of the country, a move welcomed by activists who say such plants harm rivers and local ecosystems.

Then in March, authorities launched an investigation into alleged environmental damage to the UNESCO-protected Tara River by the China Road and Bridge Corporation, CRBC, the main contractor on building the Bar-Boljare highway.

But Ikovic said it was not enough.

“While authorities praise the ecological state, locals are still on guard trying to protect their rivers and forests,” he told BIRN. “Meanwhile, institutions approve the robbery by remaining silent or seeking a legal solution that will be good for both the investor and the citizen. They want to solve our problems but without offending those who stole our natural resources.”

The government took a further step in July when it announced that the abandoned salt

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plants at Salina in the coastal town of Ulcinj would be state property, a move seen as vital to protecting important habitat for some 250 species of bird that live and nest there. The government rejected the request of the bankrupt private salt company Bajo Sekulic for property rights to the area.

Yet just a few months earlier, in March, environmental groups criticized a decision by authorities to allow the start of exploratory drilling for oil and gas by Italy's Eni and Russian Novatek some 26 kilometers off the Montenegrin coast, dismissing concerns over the risk to Adriatic waters, marine life and the vital tourism sector.

"Unfortunately, the new government uses the same governance mechanisms as the previous one," said Ikovic.

"Instead of protecting the interests of the citizens, Ministry for Capital Investments secretary represent the companies that are drilling the Adriatic for oil. For sure, we will have environmental harm due to the drilling, even though no one knows if we have oil nor in what quantities."

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