

Mitrovica in northern Kosovo is a divided town, between ethnic Serbs north of the Ibar river and ethnic Albanians predominantly to the south. One thing politicians on both sides do share, however, is a distinct lack of interest in the city's pressing environmental issues. More than two decades since the 1998-99 Kosovo war, Mitrovica's ethnic divide has left northern Kosovo the most polluted part of a polluted country. Widespread pollution is choking Kosovo's rivers and contaminating drinking water. Successive governments have done little to stop it.

Nerimane Ferizi was 20 years old when she set out to become a water warden in her hometown of Mitrovica, the year Kosovo declared independence from Serbia. Twelve years on, Ferizi is fighting the same fight, as the Mitrovica reporter for the environmental organisation 'Let's Do It Kosova,' an arm of the 'Let's Do It! World' network that works to promote a zero-waste world.

"The rivers and lakes are cleaned but after a week they're full of garbage again," Ferizi told BIRN. "It may sound unbelievable, but that's how it is."

Vital lake full of garbage

In 2018, a clean-up of illegal landfills in the north by Let's Do It Kosova and Kosovo's environment ministry filled more than 600 garbage sacks. The most popular dumping ground is Gazivoda Lake that straddles the border between Serbia and Kosovo and falls mainly under the north Kosovo municipality of Zubin Potok, which is majority-Serb. The artificial lake provides drinking water for more than a third of Kosovo's 1.8 million people and cooling water for the two coal-fired power plants that account for almost all of the country's electricity production. The lake, however, is full of garbage.

"Construction companies, in the absence of a landfill for construction waste in Mitrovica, go from south to north and put their waste near the shore of the lake, or in it," said Luan Hasanaj, executive director of Let's Do It Kosova.

Hasanaj said that much of the waste from the once-mighty Trepca lead, zinc and silver mining complex based in Mitrovica also ends up in the lake.

Zubin Potok mayor Srdjan Vulovic, a former head of maintenance management at Gazivoda Lake, did not respond to a request for comment. Besides Gazivoda, all four main rivers in the region are polluted, mostly from sewage discharged directly into the water, said Irfan Peci, a municipal environmental officer on the south side of Mitrovica.

"The most polluted river is the Sitnica," Peci said. "It starts from the industrial waste that comes from KEK [the state-owned power utility Kosovo Energy Corporation] and continues through the river in Vushtrri [Vucitrn] and then Mitrovica."

The Municipality of Mitrovica received a 45 million-euro grant from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, EBRD, to build a sewage treatment plant but work was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Proliferation of illegal landfill

Water pollution is not limited to the north. All of Kosovo's eight major rivers and five lakes are blighted by illegal landfills. Let's Do It Kosova has identified 100 sites.

"There's no place we haven't found landfills near the shores or in the water," Hasanaj told BIRN.

This January, the Pestova company behind the popular potato crisp brand 'Vipa Chips' was fined 500 euros after a resident of Vushtrri/Vucitrn, on the road to the capital, Prishtine/Pristina, filmed a truck dumping potato waste into the Sitnica river, one of the main natural water sources in the region. Those living in Vushtrri/Vucitrn have repeatedly complained about pollution from a number of factories; in September 2018, a petition was filed for the removal of a slaughterhouse near the Sitnica. Nothing happened. The town mayor, Xhafer Tahiri, said the slaughterhouse would be moved "very soon" and insisted the local authorities were well aware of the threat to local water sources.

"Criminal proceedings have been initiated against several private individuals who have polluted the rivers," Tahiri told BIRN. "This year we have planned a project of 1.8 million euros for the Sitnica riverbed." The pandemic, however, postponed this project too.

Black Rivers

A report released in March by the Democratic Institute of Kosovo, a member of Transparency International, pinpointed the Sitnica as one of the most polluted waterways in Kosovo. The Sitnica and other main rivers are "so polluted that water cannot be used as a source of water supply, and in some places even for irrigation," KDI said in the report titled The Black Rivers of Kosovo.

According to Diana Metushi-Krasniqi, the author of the report, Kosovo faces systemic issues in terms of water treatment, first and foremost the scourge of untreated sewage and industrial water allowed to flow, untreated and illegally, into the country's rivers. In a 2020 report, the World Bank criticised Kosovo's institutions for being too weak in enforcing existing rules. Both this report and that of KDI identified KEK as a major culprit. KEK spokesman Skender Bucolli said both reports were inaccurate.

"The environmental situation has changed for the better," he told BIRN.

Big polluters taken to court

Besides KEK, the nickel plant Newco Ferronikeli and cement producer Sharrcem were also identified as major polluters. Neither company responded to BIRN requests for comment. Kosovo's environment ministry has filed charges against KEK and Ferronikeli for "polluting the environment." The case against KEK is still ongoing, while Ferronikeli was fined 40,000 euros. In the last three years, over a hundred other companies have been sent to court over environmental pollution. Twenty-four were fined.

The KDI report also highlighted the problem of pollution from the Artana and Kishnica lead and zinc mines flowing into the Gracanka river, a source of drinking water for the town of Gracanica south of the capital and surrounding villages. The water has been found to contain high levels of sulfate ion that can cause dehydration and diarrhea. Gracanica municipality spokesman Leutrim Ajeti said the Kosovo government had provided little help. "Nothing has been done regarding the pollution so far, except that the Ministry has financed concreting the river bank of Gracanica," he said.

According to the KDI report, beside sulfate ion, Gracanka river has the highest concentration of manganese among rivers in Kosovo, a potential cause of damage to the nervous system. While it did not comment specifically on Gracanka river, the environment ministry told BIRN that feasibility studies had been carried out for the construction of wastewater treatment plants in Prishtine/Pristina, Mitrovica, Gjilan/Gnjilane, Ferizaj/Urosevac, Prizren, Gjakova/Djakovica, Peja/Pec and a number of smaller towns and villages. Construction, it said, is underway in Prizren, Gjakova/Djakovica and Peja/Pec.

Turning a blind eye

In recent years, reports of dead fish surfacing in Kosovo's rivers have spurred calls for action.

The KDI report, however, warned that besides the threat to wildlife, water pollution endangers the health of Kosovo's people too. Many homes in rural areas still rely on wells, it said, which are filled by polluted streams. The quality of this water is not subject to inspection. Citing statistics from the National Institute of Public Health from 2017, the report noted a worrying increase in instances of diarrhea and salmonella. Hasanaj of Let's Do It Kosova said the failure of successive governments to tackle the problem had fed into a general neglect within Kosovo society for water as a public good that needs protecting. "If, for example, you look at our homes and backyards, they are clean. People are aware of the importance of a clean [personal] environment, but not of the importance of a clean

common environment,” Hasanaj said.

In Mitrovica, Ferizi agreed, accusing residents and municipal inspectors of turning a blind eye to pollution.

“As a society we still don’t understand the causes of our illnesses,” she told BIRN. “They come from impure air and impure water, and we are responsible for that. We are a collective society, but we have failed to build collective responsibility.”

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