

In July, the locals were shocked by the sudden activation of construction on locations from which, they believed, the investor gave up a long time ago. The first concession agreement on Čestogaz, Ljubaštica and Crnja was signed in 2008, and the construction permit was issued in 2011. Since the construction did not take place (although both documents were changed several times), in 2016 the Government ordered the Ministry of Economy to take steps to terminate the contract.

Activists and residents of the village of Rečine stopped the works on the construction of a small hydro power plant (SHPP) on Skrbuša near Kolašin. Skrbuša is one of the rivers on which the construction of SHPPs began in the past months, while the public was occupied by the coronavirus pandemic and preparations for the parliamentary elections. The rivers Čestogaz, Ljubaštica and Crnja, which flow through the Komovi Nature Park, were also attacked then. Together with Skrbuša, they belong to the life-giving tributaries of the Tara River, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Investors in small hydro power plants in Montenegro, close partners of the previous government, are in a hurry with their construction due to the suspicion that the new government will not be so inclined to them. For the time being, the locals cannot trust the new government, but only their own bodies, which they are trying to prevent from being built.

Pipes suddenly appeared on the tributaries of the Tara this summer. Residents of one of the affected local communities, Bare Kraljske, responded by protesting and blocking access roads. Thus, they prevented the company Dekar from using the confusion and destroying the river Čestogaz, without which the locals, as they say, “can hang themselves”.

Rečinjani these days claim that the investor of SHPP in Skrbuša, Hydro Logistics, is trying to complete the works planned to last until 2022 as soon as possible - in other words, before the consolidation of the new authorities and a possible ban on small derivation hydropower plants, which locals and activists hope for. they called repeatedly. It could be a swan song of the current policy of subsidizing small derivation hydropower plants in Montenegro. As Aleksandar Dragičević explains: “The fight for Montenegrin rivers has entered its last stage. With the change of government that enabled the survival of a dozen Montenegrin rivers, the concessionaires lost their biggest ally and understand that the future government will introduce a moratorium on the construction of new SHPPs. That is in the programs of all three coalitions that will form the new government. ”

Therefore, according to Dragičević, the concessionaires have accelerated activities on the construction of new SHPPs in the past month, in order to use the last chance for easy enrichment at the expense of nature and citizens. However, as he adds: “The locals of the

Podkomovo area are determined not to allow investors to realize this idea, and to preserve their rivers, nature and tradition.” The recent visit of Dritan Abazović to Bare Kraljske indicates that the construction of SHPPs in Montenegro could really be banned. The civic movement URA, of which Abazović is the president, is the only Montenegrin party that is a member of the Greens of Europe, and solving environmental problems was also an important point of the pre-election campaign of the “Black on White” coalition.

“The future government should terminate all concessions for SHPPs and permanently ban the construction of SHPPs. If not, there would be no government. We have already launched an initiative towards the Greens in the European Parliament to help draft a document, which should go to combating the construction of SHPPs. Every construction of SHPP is corruption in itself “, said the then key actor of the new authorities, according to Vijesti.

Legal obstacles

While the works on Čestogaz, Ljubaštica and Crnja were prevented, the investor, unfortunately, recently obtained the consent of the locals from Rečin for the construction of SHPPs in exchange for the promise to asphalt three kilometers of road, repair the macadam road to the cemetery, “correct the curve near Galerija “And employ“ a number of workers “from the village. Other locals and activists, however, not only condemn such an “environmental sale”, but also consider it a senseless hoax. The promised path, claims activist Denis Mekić in his address via social networks, can only serve the investor; the local climate makes the asphaltting unsustainable, and the mentioned Gallery is a geological site and a bear habitat that must not be touched. The same video also reveals the extent of the concession owner’s commitment to hiring domestic labor: the last workers caught at the water intake were from Turkey.

While the activists showed understanding for the hired workers, escorting them from the construction site in their mother tongue and offering them transportation, they were not so kind to the influential investor. Vasilije Ivanović, a resident of Rečin, told the representative of Hydro Logistics on that, as far as the people of Rečin are concerned, the works have been stopped, and that, in their opinion, the investor came here only to demolish and steal. “You are destroying someone’s property and your grandfather’s; this is not a river, this is the bloodstream of Rečina “, Ivanović explained during the blockade of the water intake.

Dekar is also accused of damaging private property, against whom Vera Mićović, a resident of Bare Kraljske, initiated court proceedings in July. The correctness of the documentation available to investors has been repeatedly questioned. Thus, the Environmental Impact Assessment Study for SHPPs on the Crnja watercourse, the third among the mentioned

rivers, is inconsistent with the data of the Republic Institute for Nature Protection to the extent that it recognizes one among (sic!) 850 protected species from the field. In addition, the same study is outdated.

The owner of Dekar, Momcilo Miranovic, persistently claims that everything is fine from the legal point of view, explaining that the Environmental Protection Agency issued a decision in July 2019 according to which an environmental impact assessment is not necessary, since it is a plant with an installed capacity of less of 1MW. It is a legal loophole that opponents of the construction of SHPPs throughout the region are struggling with. This provision, for example, led to the Kutska River being completely buried in as many as 4 “small” hydroelectric power plants. In order to prove his rights, Miranović also refers to the notorious Law on Spatial Planning and Construction of Facilities from 2017.

However, not only is the mentioned Law, which enabled the unprecedented centralization of spatial planning in Montenegro, concentration of power and profit from the exploitation of spatial resources, the subject of many years of criticism by experts and (opposition) local governments, but in this case the owner of the concession. Namely, Miranović received the concession for the three disputed SHPPs back in 2008, but the Spatial Plan of Montenegro adopted in the same year foresaw that the area where Crnja, Ljubaštica and Čestogaz flow would include in the meantime (2019) the declared Komovi Nature Park. Therefore, according to experts, no lower-level spatial plan could formally approve a potentially destructive investment such as the construction of SHPPs.

Arrogant investors

Undoubtedly, investors will not give up easily, because serious material interests are at stake. As the Montenegrin Network for Affirmation of the Non-Governmental Sector (NGO MANS) announced during the Regional Conference on Small Hydro Power Plants held in mid-2018 in Podgorica: “(In) the period from 2014-17. companies in Montenegro that build SHPPs paid 12 times less to the state for concessions compared to the subsidies they earned. The latter account for more than half of the revenues of SHPP owners in Montenegro in the same period, ie 4.7 out of 9 million euros.

According to the statement of the then Ines Mrdović, research coordinator of the NGO MANS: “Domestic, privileged individuals are enabled to build small HPPs and wind farms under privileged conditions.” Those who invest in renewable energy sources in Montenegro are often in friendly and kinship relations with prominent government officials. Thus, in May 2020, the media revealed that the son of the current president, Milo Đukanović, owed a quarter of a million euros for the construction of the SHPP on Skrbuša. More precisely,

Blažo Đukanović pledged business premises in the capital on behalf of a loan intended for the company Hydro Logistics, of which he is a co-owner.

The power imbalance between state institutions in charge of environmental protection and bodies in charge of issuing construction permits and concessions is similar to the rest of the region - except that in Montenegro, paradoxically, they are under the auspices of the same ministry, the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Tourism.

To the list of unjustified construction of SHPPs in Montenegro, let us add that, with 33% of electricity obtained from renewable energy sources (RES), Montenegro has long met the criteria of the European Union, which in 2005 required member states and potential members to have at least 27 % of electricity obtained from RES. Based on that request, fifteen years ago, the introduction of feed-in tariffs for SHPPs began, which proved to be harmful in all aspects. The European Union, meanwhile, has waived subsidies for RES producers and small derivation hydropower plants, and the European Commission recently called on Western Balkan countries to do the same.

So far, however, only the BiH House of Representatives has begun the procedure of introducing a ban on SHPPs throughout the country, while in other countries locals and activists are still forced to face inconsistent legislation, unfavorable judiciary, powerful “businessmen” and construction machinery.

The field fight against SHPPs in Montenegro in recent years has grown in proportion to the organization in other parts of the region and the public’s awareness of the issue. While at the end of the last decade, when thirty-year concessions and first permits were issued, not much was known about SHPPs and feed-in tariffs, since 2014, when the first SHPP in Montenegro was built, the population has been convinced that they bring only destruction and connected more efficiently. The key victory of the activists was achieved, after a two-year struggle, in the fall of 2019 on the river Bukovica near Savnik. The government then made a concession, terminating 12 concession agreements and promising to review some. According to Radio Free Europe, the Montenegrin authorities have so far signed a total of 85 concession agreements for SHPPs, 24 are in operation, 18 are under construction; for two, planning documentation is being prepared and six of them are in the process of drafting project documentation. At the cost of leaving the population and livestock without drinking water and tourist resources, they bring a proverbially negligible percentage of the required electricity at the national level. The percentage of electricity obtained from SHPPs, for example, in 2019 was around 2% (slightly more than that, last year, to the displeasure of citizens, due to subsidies, its price also jumped).

While they are more and more successfully interconnected, the inhabitants of the

endangered areas for the time being seem to be distrustful of the participants in the parliamentary struggle. Although Abazović was received as a welcome comrade-in-arms in September, not a single vote went to his list in this area in the recent republican elections. As the president of MZ Bare Kraljske stated in July, calling on the citizens to defend the rivers: “We have organized ourselves in the defense of these rivers, because we are not only defending these rivers, but all Montenegrin rivers.” By putting rivers in a pipe, we have no life here “. That is why they will organize a joint protest with the people of Rečin.

Source: bilten.org