

An initiative to call a referendum has arrived at the Uzice Assembly to discuss the construction of small hydroelectric power plants (SHPPs) in the southwest of Serbia. The initiative was submitted by the Citizens' Association "Uzice Defense League", which, with the message that SHPPs are destroying the eco-system, asks Uzice residents to decide whether they need to build new ones, but also what to do with existing small-hydro power plants.

"All important decisions for Uzice must be made in the local community, not in Belgrade," said Aleksandar Ostojic of the Uzice Defense League.

The construction of 18 mini hydropower plants is planned in the Uzice area, mainly on the Djetinja River and its tributaries. Two are already working and two have recently lost their building permit because they were not built within the legal deadline.

"There is almost no control over permits and construction of small hydro power plants, as is the use of water without respecting the biological minimum. In practice, we see rivers and streams heal to a much greater length and use access roads that destroy the eco-system of mini-rivers. We are not as rich in water as was once taught in school, but on the contrary. That is why we ask the citizens of Uzice to declare whether we need further construction of mini-power plants and what to do with these power plants that are already in operation," Ostojic says.

Confirming that the initiative to call the referendum has arrived at the Uzice City Assembly, its president, Branislav Mitrovic, tells Radio Free Europe (RFE) that councilors will discuss it in the coming period.

"The referendum is an expensive process, and on the other hand, we in the city government believe that professional people need to give a clearer and more concrete position. We also need to know that, until about ten years ago, the story of renewable energy came from the body of the European Union, and now it is completely different talking about small hydropower plants. And I'm in favour of not building them where they do great damage to ecosystems, and that we have to protect the environment. Construction in protected areas is out of the question, but there are also areas and watercourses where the construction of a mini power plant does no harm. This must be evaluated by experts. We definitely need to talk about the initiative to call the referendum," Mitrovic said.

Experts who took part in the panel organized by the Students Union in Uzice and the "Defend the Rivers of Western Serbia" movement in Uzice point to the damage that the work of SHPPs produces to the environment, as well as their energy justification. The Dean of the Faculty of Forestry in Belgrade, Ratko Ristic, questions why a concept that gives a little energy is being pushed.

“Small hydropower plants, as their name implies, produce very little energy and if we were to make 856 of that never officially adopted cadastre of 1987, we would not have more than 2 to 3.5 percent of the energy required annually. But it would mean that we have ruined almost all mountain watercourses, that we have inserted over 2,200 kilometers of watercourses into the pipes, that we have destroyed the living world of the ecosystems of those areas, ”said Ristic.

According to the law, ten percent of signatures of Uzice citizens are required to call a referendum. More than 50 percent of citizens must turn out for a referendum to succeed. Should the initiative for the announcement be adopted and the citizens vote against, any further issuance of permits for the construction of SHPP would be a violation of the law, points out the chairman of the Board of Directors of the Uzice Defense League, lawyer Mihailo Krstic.

“The City Assembly needs to make a decision to call a referendum. If they make a different decision, it will tell people who are sitting there that they do not have the best quality attitude to this problem. After the decision on the referendum is passed, it is called within a short period of 15 to 90 days under the current Law on Referendum and People’s Initiative. If the citizens of Uzice declare that they are not in favor of further construction of SHPP, we will permanently solve the problem in this way, and not as before, on a case-by-case basis, ”says Krstic.

Residents’ protests

The construction of a small hydropower plant in the village of Bioska above Uzice, on Ročanski potok, has recently been suspended because the investor has expired a building permit, but also because of protests organized by the villagers.

“I urge people to protest freely and to contact local assemblies to discuss small hydropower plants there. If someone ignores it, go out to the barricades, don’t give up your rivers because you are entitled to them. The profession spoke out, only the law-enforcing state was silent. The Constitution and all laws are on our side. Just let our rivers flow freely and everything will be fine, ”said Aleksandar Jovanovic in Uzice from the movement” Defend the rivers of Stara Planina “.

Uzice is one in a number of cities and regions in Serbia whose residents oppose the construction of small hydropower plants. The greatest resistance was provided by the villagers of the old mountain village of Topli Do, where after the protests and blockades, the investor gave up construction.

“It is clear to everyone that this must be prevented. And institutions in Serbia like the

Serbian Academy of Sciences, the Chamber of Engineers, several deans of the faculties of science, as well as foreign, mostly European institutions, such as the European Commission and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which started these projects, all of them together said that these projects are devastating to nature and people living by their rivers, "Jovanovic said.

A revision of the Spatial Plan of the City of Uzice is planned for next year, which for now gives legitimacy to permits for the construction of all 18 small hydro power plants in that city. Former director of the Uzice Directorate for Construction, Ivan Petronivic, states that such a decision could be changed by a referendum.

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