

Ministry of Environment is preparing amendments to the Law on Nature Protection, which foresees a ban on the construction of SHPPs in protected areas

Serbia to become the first country in Europe to ban the construction of SHPPs in protected areas. Accordingly, the logical question is whether the Government of Serbia has greater environmental awareness than governments in other countries of the Old Continent.

Recently, after the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, promised activists opposing the construction of small hydropower plants that building these renewable energy sources in national parks and protected areas would be banned, the logical question is what will happen to the facilities that have already been built.

So far, eight small hydropower plants have been built in the national parks (three each in Kopaonik and Golija and two in Stara Planina), while out of a total of 856 sites planned to develop these renewable energy sources in Serbia, 280 are located in protected areas. Competent authorities have not yet disclosed what fate awaits the already built SHPPs and what will happen to those under construction. In other words, will the ban have retroactive effect and cover existing facilities and those under construction or will it only apply to planned projects that have not been started.

Otherwise, President Vucic’s initiative to break off the construction of SHPPs in protected areas is not the first such position to come from the authorities. Namely, the Ministry of Environment is preparing amendments to the Law on Nature Protection, which provides for the prohibition of the construction of small hydroelectric power plants in protected areas. It also provides for inspection and monitoring both during the period of works and when small hydropower plants start operating. If throughout the monitoring it turns out that the investor does not comply with the nature protection or water conditions or did not incorporate into the project all of the nature protection requirements, the inspector will be able to prohibit the works and order all deficiencies to be corrected.

If the investor fails to do so, the inspector will be able to order permanent suspension of works and site restoration at the investor’s expense.

Until recently, President Vucic had not dealt with this topic, and his promise that the SHPPs would no longer be built came six months before the elections to be held next spring. What also draws attention is that Serbia will become the first country in Europe to ban the construction of SHPPs in protected areas.

Accordingly, the logical question is whether the Government of Serbia has greater environmental awareness than governments in other countries of the “Old Continent”, since

they have not made a similar move?

The dilemma is also created by the statement of the Minister of Energy, Aleksandar Antic, that “if they are built according to the regulations, SHPPs are the least harmful to nature”, so why are only these but not other renewable energy sources in Serbia on the agenda?

While part of the experts explicitly oppose the construction of small hydropower plants, considering that they pose great danger to watercourses and aquatic life, the other part considers that there is an “aggressive campaign” against SHPPs, aiming to “prevent Serbia from having sufficient quantities of electricity produced in the country, forcing it to rely on imports from countries with far more small hydro power plants than in Serbia.”

- No SHPPs are currently being built on Stara Planina where protests against the construction of small hydropower plants are in full swing. The ones being built are outside the protected areas. A total of eight small hydropower plants have been built throughout Serbia in protected areas, none of which are in the first protection zone but are located in the second or third. The campaign launched against SHPPs reflects poorly on their construction, as banks do not dare to lend, fearing that the projects will not be completed due to bans - Dragan Stipicic says, a member of the Board of Directors of the National Board of the Small Hydro Power Plants Association. When it comes to already built small hydropower plants in protected areas, he adds that there are no adequate sites in the country for them to be relocated.

- We are convinced that the constructed small hydropower plants in protected areas will not be demolished, but that the ban will only apply to the construction of new facilities of this type - our interviewee concluded.

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