

The recent campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, related to the activities of Kelag from Austria, has attracted attention. This large electricity producer has caused fierce controversy precisely because of its SHPPs in these countries, or the consequences of their construction on rivers such as the Sana and Ugar in BiH or Lumbardhi / Bistrica in Kosovo. Kelag owns only one wind farm in Croatia, but its representative announced in the media this summer that the company sees “a large segment of its future development” precisely in the fact that the Republic of Croatia has “continuously good water potential”.

Mini hydropower plants (SHPPs) in Croatia, and their impact on the environment, have been the subject of heated debate in recent years. Their construction was encouraged by the benefits of purchasing electricity obtained from a principally renewable energy source – a natural watercourse – but it turned out that they still upset the balance of river ecosystems. Thanks to the pressure of non-governmental, activist associations, as well as EU regulation, in the meantime, the forcing of mini-hydro power plants in the Republic of Croatia has somewhat subsided. They gave way to less controversial wind farms, solar panels and other forms of exploitation of various renewable energy potentials.

“The problem with mini-hydropower plants is primarily that they are mostly built on the best-preserved parts of often virtually intact smaller rivers, and that the extent of their impact is extremely difficult to control, or not even serious,” says Denis Franciskovic of the Karlovac Environmental Society Pan in an interview for DW.

Doubts about SHPPs may seem overwhelming, but that is where the main trouble lies. Thus they do not necessarily have to be built with a dam across the river, but only along one bank, but still drag the watercourse nut towards the edge, leaving travertine barriers without the sufficient amount of water necessary for their natural regeneration.

Furthermore, partition structures may include so-called a fish path for the migratory path of certain species of fish, and too often this ends only as an insufficiently effective alibi-solution. In several cases, for example, the effects that come to the fore only with the construction of a series of SHPPs on a river were not taken into account, which was also a pronounced tendency. But then their public subsidization was stopped – but only until further notice – so the topic has so far fallen somewhat into the background. However, we should not expect that the problem will disappear, especially if we know that the public company Hrvatska elektroprivreda (HEP) is now building large hydroelectric reservoirs. However, for another aspect of this issue, we asked energy expert Robert Pasicek from the Croatian Green Energy Cooperative, also an expert of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Why was it so much easier to build profitable mini-hydro power plants in the Republic of Croatia than small – and more environmentally friendly – energy plants of

civil communities?

The issue concerns the development of energy democratization, which is (im) possible primarily by state legislation. Pasicko points out that SHPP technology is neither good nor bad in itself. “But the impacts of construction need to be more seriously assessed and controlled with regard to environmental and social priorities. I worked on projects in Tajikistan where people in the mountains build as few mini-hydropower plants as possible, and there was no environmental damage. With us, and even more, for example in BiH, this was generally not encouraged from local communities, nor was their views taken into account. That is why people in Fojnica camped along the river for a year and a half, until the investor gave up construction. “Better practices, when it comes to Croatia, were seen in Pleternica or Krizevci, with the investment and management participation of the local community, energy use for public lighting and so on.

“Transparency and democracy in making a profit, financial and energy, are the solution for better treatment of eco-priorities. That is why we need a lot more projects, the so-called civil energy. The new EU goal of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 55 percent by 2030, can only be achieved in this way, and not by projects of HEP or private companies without adequate control, “said Robert Pasicko.

And it is clear that we will not have to wait a full ten years for the results of such a plan, because they will depend on the orientation that the Republic of Croatia must take at the beginning of that period.

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