

Unique rivers in the Balkans at risk as investors exploit the corona crisis for illegal construction of hydropower plants.

“The state of emergency should not be an excuse for the exploitation of public resources, but rather an occasion for solidarity and a sensible use of our resources,” says Redžib Skomorac of the NGO Center for Environment, Blue Heart partner in BiH.

The Corona crisis is a threat to the Blue Heart of Europe - the unique Balkan rivers. While Europe is in lockdown, investors are increasingly taking advantage of the unusual situation to build controversial hydropower projects in secret. This is particularly true of rivers in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). South of the capital Sarajevo, the construction of five dams has now begun or is being pushed, in some cases without permits.

Specifically, it is about construction sites on the rivers Bjelava, Mala Bjelava, Vrhovinska, Željeznica and Prača (find their locations on this map). All of these rivers are almost untouched and of exceptional beauty. The construction of the hydropower plant on the Vrhovinska river is - according to our information - illegal, as no permits have been issued for its construction. In addition, the construction work on all projects is being executed without the legally required building supervision, because the necessary “inspectors” are not present at the construction site due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“These environmental crimes are being committed in the shadow of the pandemic. Investors are taking advantage of this unique opportunity to create structural facts without inconvenient inspections or protests from residents and environmental organisations. We are not talking about just any streams and rivers, but about the most unique and so far largely untouched watercourses,” says Ulrich Eichelmann of Riverwatch, coordinator of the Save the Blue Heart of Europe campaign.

The Coalition for the Protection of Rivers in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Save the Blue Heart of Europe campaign therefore call on Prime Ministers and Presidents of Bosnia-Herzegovina to stop the dam construction and urgently impose a moratorium on the construction of small hydropower plants as well as on the granting of new concessions.

“We call for more rigorous prevention and tougher penalties to prevent unjust enrichment, criminal behaviour and usury opportunism, i.e. to ensure that the competent authorities comply with the law, constitutional and moral principles”, so Anes Podić from the NGO Eko Akcija.

“We see a similar approach in many places in Europe: reports from Romania tell us that the



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already massive illegal logging continues to increase, from the Balkans that even more protected birds are shot from the sky. The loopholes this pandemic offers to those who want to enrich themselves at the expense of nature are used unscrupulously", says Gabriel Schwaderer, Executive Director of EuroNatur.

Source: riverwatch.eu