

## The construction of SHPPs on one of the cleanest rivers in Serbia, Rupska Reka, remains a crime without punishment

The municipality of Vlasotince, in June 2019, under the pressure of the citizens, passed the Decision on changing the Spatial Plan and promised to delete all potential locations for small hydro power plants. The deputies then acknowledged that derivation SHPPs cause “drying of watercourses downstream from the water intake, endangering the sources of healthy drinking water, destruction of riverbeds and coastal areas, reduction of flora and fauna” and adversely affect the quality of life of the local population.

Locals and activists are trying to save one of the three cleanest rivers in Serbia from building a third hydroelectric power plant, which they claim would complete it. Serbia, meanwhile, ignores criticism and appeals from international environmental associations and the European Commission.

On the Rupska / Bajinska / Kozaračka river, the longest tributary of the South Morava, the issuance of permits for the construction of the third small hydroelectric power plant, SHPP “Besko”, is in the process. Will the interests of investors prevail despite the huge damage caused to the river and its surroundings by the existing hydropower plants and last year’s promise of the local self-government that it will not allow the construction of new ones? By deleting the locations for SHPPs from the spatial plan of Vlasotince, not only the Rupska River would be protected, but also Vlasina with its tributaries, on which 15 SHPPs have already been built, and as many as 55 SHPPs are planned. In some of these rivers, drinking water flows - the same one that is captured in “Vlasinska rosa” - and many, including Rupska, are a habitat for protected species such as brown trout and crayfish.

Hydropower plants on the Rupska River, in particular, endanger the water supply of as many as 15,000 people in Grdelica. As Srdjan Jović from the association “Rupska Reka” stated in 2016: “With the construction of the first hydroelectric power plant, our water factory was destroyed - and that is nature.”

The decision to change the spatial plan introduced a one-year moratorium on the construction of SHPPs. However:

“Instead of respecting the law on planning and construction, and approaching the shortened procedure of changing the spatial plan, the municipality did - imagine what?” It was delayed, and the deadline for changing the plan of 12 months has passed!”, Explains Marina Kessler from the environmental association Correct Center for the Defense of Rivers and Rivers of Crna Trava.

In the meantime, on December 12, 2019. The municipality acted in favor of investors: The Municipality of Vlasotince has issued a building permit for SHPP “Besko” despite two negative opinions of the Institute for Nature Protection, which states that there are already 4 hydrotechnical facilities on the Rupska River: Pond “Ruplje”, SHPP “Laniste”, SHPP

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“Porecje” and water intake for water supply, so that with the construction of SHPP “Besko” 76.4% of the Rupska River would be occupied by hydro-technical facilities, and that would permanently disrupt the biodiversity of the Rupska River. Despite everything they know, the urban planners of the municipality of Vlasotince are issuing a building permit for the SHPP “Besko”, during the moratorium, Kessler is horrified.

Activists of several organizations, including the Association “Rupska Reka”, the Battle of Vlasina, ORSP, the Right to Water and the Vlasotince People’s Front planned to present their arguments at a public debate in the municipality of Vlasotince, which was scheduled for September 23, 2020.

However, the discussion was postponed because too many interested people applied for it, so it was not possible to implement protection measures against coronavirus.

Instead of the public debate on SHPP, it was discussed at the session of the municipal assembly, within the discussion on changes and amendments to the decision on the adoption of the general regulation plan. On that occasion, the president of the municipality, Bratislav Petković, stated that the problem is not in the competence of the local self-government, but in the hands of the PE Srbijavoda and the Ministry of Energy, which is responsible for issuing the energy permit. According to him, the municipality can only “procrastinate”.

Activists, however, disagree with these allegations.

As Kessler specifies, it was Petković who in 2019, as the president of the municipal assembly, signed the mentioned Decision on changes to the spatial plan of the municipality of Vlasotince, which deletes potential locations for SHPPs:

It is important that we all know that all jurisdictions for the issuance of construction permits for SHPPs are in the local self-government, unless they are protected areas. The president’s allegations are not true. It’s all up to the local government.

Kessler also explains that the Ministry of Energy, to which the mayor is trying to transfer responsibility, cannot issue an energy permit if the municipality has not previously issued location information, or location conditions:

So, it is true that the Ministry issues an energy permit, but only after the investor has received location conditions from the municipality, or information about the location. In the case of SHPP “Besko”, the energy permit was issued on the basis of location information. All rivers are under the jurisdiction of Srbija Vode, but I repeat, information on the location, location conditions, and building permits are issued by the local self-government.

### **Authorities ignore international appeals as well**

In the meantime, on World River Day, September 27, several international organizations

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appealed to the countries of the Western Balkans to introduce a complete ban instead of subsidies for the owners of small derivation hydroelectric power plants.

Representatives of CEE Bankwatch Network, Euronatur, RiverWatch and WWFAdria reiterated that Serbia, where the largest number of SHPPs in the Balkans is planned, will sacrifice about 2,200 kilometers of mountain watercourses for the nominal 2-3.5% of electricity needs if all 850 are built on an annual basis.

Foreign and domestic experts believe that even that is an exaggerated estimate, which is based on the hydropower potential of rivers in the torrent period, while in reality it is only half a percent of the annual electricity required. RiverWatch has been warning for years that the construction of over 2,700 SHPPs in the Balkans in practice means an endangered species for as many as 50 species of freshwater fish, 11 of which are endemic.

Pipa Gallop, Southeast Europe's energy adviser at Bankwatch, pointed out that reliance on SHPPs is not only an outdated model, which the EU has in the meantime abandoned, but also a model that violates EU rules on state aid for environmental protection. environment and energy. The Energy Community and EU technical expert groups for financial taxonomy have recognized that derivation SHPPs cause great environmental and social damage and included this conclusion in the relevant documentation regulating the field of environmental protection, primarily the EU document on Principles of Sustainable Hydropower Development of countries of the Western Balkans. As the Right to Water reports, this is confirmed by the latest report of the European Commission on Serbia's progress in the process of negotiations with the European Union.

Environmental organizations and the EU are increasingly calling on the governments of the Western Balkans to harmonize laws and regulations with the conclusions of the profession and EU regulations, and direct incentives for RES to the production of electricity from other renewable sources, ie solar and wind energy.

It should be reminded that Serbia missed the opportunity not to renew the Decree on incentive measures for the production of electricity from renewable sources, which ceased to be valid in January this year.

About 85 of the planned 850 small derivation hydropower plants have been built in our country so far.

Source: masina.rs