

The construction of the hydro system threatens the unique natural wealth of the upper Neretva. It also poses a danger to the population. Investors do not heed the warnings. RS government in the service of a private investor.

The company EFT, owned by Vuk Hamović, does not give up its intention to complete the construction of the Hydroelectric Power Plant “Ulog” in the upper course of the Neretva River, without addressing all the appeals of citizens, the professional public and environmental associations.

Even without these dramatic appeals, it is enough to look at the photos of this construction site to easily understand what an ecological catastrophe it is even after the construction phase so far.

Images of this unique natural beauty look apocalyptic, and expert estimates say a real apocalypse will ensue if this crime against nature is not stopped.

However, investors have the absolute support of the entity authorities of Republika Srpska, which, when it comes to the interests of EFT and Vuk Hamović in recent years, did not pay attention to warnings or laws, nor to the rights of citizens whose property was initiated.

When necessary, the police of this entity stood up to protect the interests of investors.

Construction, which began in 2010 without the necessary permits, was stopped only in 2013 by a tragedy with human casualties. In short, because the works have continued, but this time with “documentation obtained” in the meantime of very dubious validity.

However, environmental associations are not giving up - the battle for the Neretva continues with legal means in the domestic judiciary, but also in international institutions.

Power in the service of capital

On the occasion of the continuation of works on the construction of HPP “Ulog” on October 13 this year, the Association of Geographers in Bosnia and Herzegovina also announced. The announcement of this association states the ecological specifics of the area endangered by the realization of the mentioned project.

They remind that the gorge valley of the upper course of the Neretva at an average altitude of about 1100 meters deep, closed and difficult to access for man downstream from the source in the length of 35.3 kilometers. According to the level of natural preservation, this valley could be defined as a nature reserve even according to the most rigorous measures. Such natural wealth, if the project of building a hydropower system is realized, will be completely destroyed. In addition to the Hydropower Plant “Ulog”, seven mini hydropower plants are planned in this part of the Neretva.

“Limited research, due to the natural wilderness of most of the upper Neretva, shows that it is one of the largest hotspots of biodiversity, originality and self-development in Bosnia and

Herzegovina. Given these natural assumptions, the upper Neretva, which is planned to destroy the HPP "Ulog", is a complete natural landscape in our country. The only larger settlement is Ulog, which is almost completely integrated into the natural landscape structure, "the association states.

Citizens and environmental associations have sent such warnings many times in the past decade, from the very beginning of the realization of the controversial and very dangerous project.

Regardless of everything, the Government of RS awarded the company EFT in 2009 a concession for the construction of HPP "Ulog". Without any necessary permits, works began in 2010 with the construction of access roads.

At the very beginning, there were problems with property and legal relations. Private owners of plots, which are exempted for the needs of this project, were offered a price five times lower than the market price. Under pressure, most agreed to sell their properties at a price of 2 convertible marks per square meter. Petar Govedarica did not agree to that. Until the investors of the hydroelectric power plants appeared at that location, he planned to build tourist facilities.

The land was taken away from them, though. The Government of the Republika Srpska ordered the expropriation of the disputed land, although Govedarice never accepted this decision nor did they sign the decision on expropriation. Their property was confiscated with the assistance of the RS police.

The investor does not hear the warnings !?

Older residents of Ulog still remember that geological research was carried out during the SFRY and that it was said at the time that this site was not good for building a dam due to the bad geological situation.

However, they publicly warned about that, however, the investors did not hear their warnings. Determined to realize their capital investment at all costs, they still had to suspend the works, when in 2013 two workers lost their lives due to a landslide.

In the following years, the construction site looked neglected and certain geological research was conducted. At least that is the conclusion of a few witnesses, who occasionally visited this terrain in the following years, considering that transparency was not a strong point for these investors from the beginning.

To this day, the results of geological research have not been submitted to the public.

Only from the documentation, which will be issued to them later by the competent authority, it is learned that the decision was made to move the dam site by about 60 meters.

In 2017, the RS government extended the deadline for the construction of HPP "Ulog" to the

company EFT until May 2022. All the necessary permits have been issued, which the investor has not had since the beginning of the project. However, environmental associations have expressed a number of objections to these permits.

The environmental impact assessment, on the basis of which the ecological permit is issued, is disputable.

According to ecologists, the investor was obliged to order a study with a special separate report that refers to possible negative impacts on the territory of another entity, ie the Federation of BiH, considering that the power plant is being built on the inter-entity line, which was not done in this case. Not only are the possible negative impacts downstream of the power plant, ie on the territory of FBiH, not mentioned, but this document does not deal with the negative impacts at the location of the project.

The rules do not apply to EFT

According to Amir Varišćić from the association “Greens” from Konjic, when asked why the environmental impact study is not the third negative impact, they did not receive an adequate response from investors.

The answer was: “It doesn’t matter how our power plant will work, and it is about the fact that it will work in peak mode.”

What it means: It means oscillations two or three times a day from the minimum so it can be up to the maximum flow. Thus, the flow varies from 0.5 cubic meters, the amount of flow determined by the so-called. with the biological minimum at the very exit from the power plant, up to 35 cubic meters, which is the maximum flow that goes to the turbine, we also have that case of overflow, when that figure could be much higher. Therefore, large oscillations of both the reservoir itself and downstream flows are expected. This will especially affect the course of the Neretva in the town of Konjic itself, where, among other things, it will endanger the tourist potentials of this town “, says Varišćić. He points out that it is a particularly pronounced risk factor, because electricity is being built in one seismic and geologically unstable area, which represents a great danger for populated places and their inhabitants downstream from the dam.

Regardless of everything, the results of geological research are hidden from the public, and a public debate in Konjic was avoided.

The only public debate that was held was held in 2010 in Kalinovik, and then it was promised that, given that the realization of this project has an impact on both BiH entities, it would be held in Konjic, which never happened.

One meeting was subsequently held in Konjic, they say in the “Greens” association, to which neither the representatives of these nor other environmental associations were invited.

Although the association claims that holding a hearing in both entities was a legal obligation of investors, the RS law on environmental protection is changing even after the start of work on the Role.

According to the Republika Srpska Law on Environmental Protection, a public hearing on a project that may have an impact on another entity or the Brcko District may or may not take place. It all depends on how and in what way the possible impact on another entity or DB is assessed. According to the legal solutions, when the preparations for the HPP "Ulog" project began, the law enabled a free assessment of the ministry on possible trans-entity impact and left it free to initiate a trans-entity impact procedure at all. Later, amendments to the Law on Environmental Protection stipulate that such projects fall under the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment of Transboundary Borders - ESPOO Convention, as well as the obligation to initiate transboundary and trans-entity procedures. Regardless of that, everyone agrees that a public debate should have been organized in Konjic, because this city and its inhabitants are the most exposed to the possible negative effects of the construction of the future hydroelectric power plant "Ulog".

However, the rules do not apply to EFT.

A special nonsense is the fact that the Government of the RS has signed an Annex to the Concession Agreement with this company, which extends the concession from 30 to 50 years.

The fact that the project documentation states that the period of use of HPP "Ulog" is 30 years is illogical. After that period, it is predicted that the turbines will be so buried that a complete reconstruction of the project will be required. So, the question is what will Republika Srpska inherit after 50 years of power plant operation !?

But, as in many other cases, the common practice of the last decades is to completely ignore the public interest before the private one, so it would be a real miracle if an exception was made in this case as well.

Due to this attitude of investors and the state towards the environment, several environmental associations have decided to complain to the Secretariat of the Bern Convention on the Protection of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats at the Council of Europe. The complaint was filed last year, and as we find out, the answer is expected in the next twenty days, when the bodies of this secretariat meet.

Due to omissions in the design and construction of the hydro system in the upper course of the Neretva, several criminal charges were filed, and an administrative dispute was initiated before the Supreme Court of the Republika Srpska in Banja Luka.

All hopes of the directly endangered population and environmental activists are focused on

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the domestic judiciary and international bodies. Meanwhile, the investor and the government show that they are not very interested in the interests of citizens and the warnings of the profession.

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