

Reason for my plowing through a countryside in the North of Albania was the occasion of the Students for Rivers Camp, located in a field in the small village of Bujan. Over ten days, tens of students and activists from Europe and as far afield as Chile, and scores of citizens impacted by hydropower in the Balkans, were meeting to discuss a way forward together. More than 3,400 HPPs are planned in the Balkans, with hundreds in Albania alone. While HPP provides most of the country's energy, they are not sustainable annually or in the long term. Producing just during the spring and summer months, most of the power is exported as the government cannot store it. Then, come winter, they buy back coal energy and sell it to Albanians at a higher cost.

Threats such as global warming mean that the construction of further HPPs is considered essentially pointless. Furthermore, the devastating impact it has on communities, culture, history, and the environment has all but been ignored by the government.

On the Valbona river, which runs through Tropoje, 14 HPPs are planned over just 30km of water. The plans have been met with anger, protests, and court cases initiated by local people, yet the construction companies continue to build.

The coming together of these students, activists, scientists, and engaged local citizens hopes to produce concrete ways forward. They aim to halt the construction of HPPs on the Valbona and Gashi and help the local people create sustainable existences based on the river and its tourism potential.

Tropoje is a municipality located in the far North of Albania. It's only realistically accessible via a two-hour ferry ride through Lake Koman or by passing through Kosovo. The most impoverished region of Europe with an almost 70% unemployment rate, it's also by far one of the most beautiful.

Stretching over 1058 square meters, it's known for its two National Parks, the Valbona and the Gashi, as well as the rivers that bear the same name. These parks are home to stunning mountain ranges, otherwise known as the Albanian Alps. With impenetrable passes, steep, craggy slopes, and snow-capped peaks that disappear behind the clouds even on the hottest summer days, they are ever-present in their majesty and impassability.

These people have lived with and in awe of the mountains, rivers, and forests for centuries, and this is reflected in every part of their culture.

It's because of these rivers that I was visiting the region. Both the Gashi and the Valbona are under threat from the construction of dams and hydropower plants. Not only will they impact protected areas rich in biodiversity, but they bring the very existence of local communities into question.

Bound by a code of feudal laws called the Kanun of Lek Dukagjini, these communities have

retained their individuality despite invasions by the Ottomans and persecution by communists. The Kanun also guides how water irrigation is divided between those living there.

The construction of dams and HPPs renders these ancient laws obsolete, privatizing rivers and water sources that have formed a central part of Tropoja for centuries. A recent report from the World Wildlife Fund noted that the planned constructions risked massacring the local communities and their way of life.

“Accepting or adapting customary law can ensure the continuing vitality of the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual life, and heritage of local communities who have also called for various forms of respect for and recognition of customary laws beyond the scope of their communities, for example, in claims over land and natural resources,” they said.

Locals say “no”

The WWF also found that HPPs are one of the main reasons people want to leave the region. One respondent stated:

“If I could, I would change the hydropower...they have a big impact on my children’s lives, they have changed the climate here.”

Other respondents explained how they have lost hope and are fearful to resist.

“It’s done; they are built. It’s come to the point where they will arrest us, and nothing has changed. We cannot do anything else. If you try and stop them, they will make it personal; they will attack you personally.”

Another added:

“They have money, they have power, and they will make conflicts with individuals...they will pick people to attack.”

A visit to a local man and his family confirmed many of these statements. Sadik is a tanned, wiry man with a mischievous face and Roman nose. His wife was quiet and slim with brown curls and pale white skin. Not a day over 19, his daughter was pale-skinned like her mother, but with black hair, dark eyes, and long lashes.

As ten students and myself descended upon them, the women served watermelon, plums, Turkish coffee, and juice, buzzing between the guests like bees in a hive. The man of the house offered cigarettes and patiently answered questions from the curious students.

He talked about his love for Tropoje and his sadness at the fact so many are leaving. He explained that the school he once taught in had around 50 pupils but closed after less than five remained. He also spoke for nature, the crops that the lands yield, and the difficulties of winter.

Lastly, he spoke about the river.

"In the summer, we fish in the river and sit by its banks, grill the fish, and eat it. We swim, we sunbathe, and we relax," he said while his wife and daughter nodded in agreement.

But he explained that since construction started on the Gashi River, the fish are not as plentiful as before. The water is cloudy, dirty, and not as ferocious. Furthermore, wildlife numbers are decreasing each year.

"We grow up with the river here. It's part of our culture. Upstream they respect and fear the river as it runs so fast, but down here; we learn to swim before we can walk," he says with a smile.

I raised my hand and asked what he would say to the heads of the hydropower companies if they were sat in front of him today.

"What's the point?" he retorted.

"They never listen to us; that will never change."

He explained how the companies had come and asked citizens if they wanted HPPs in the area. Those that said no were ignored and threatened; others were paid to show support.

"If you offer people money for their signature, they will sign. They are poor and suffering; people are killing themselves because they cannot pay electricity bills- if someone comes and gives them money, what choice do they have?" he adds.

A discussion ensues about how companies use the names of dead people, those living outside of the area, and even names and ID numbers without permission, to drum up the illusion of support for the project.

All the while, the Valbona roared in the background, an inescapable and wonderful part of every part of Tropojan life.

A history of struggle

But there is also a darker side to this way of life.

Between 1990 and 2000, Tropoje witnessed a brutal and drawn-out massacre. The Haklaj family, headed by the infamous patriarch Fatmir, waged war with the Hoxha family and anyone that dared to cross their path. Over the course of 10 years, they killed between 135 and 200 people, all in the name of 'honor.' Many others died due to fall out from the feud.

I decided to visit the house I was told has been abandoned, blown up, and vandalized. I walked up a grassy path and crossed a small stream. In front of me was a 10 ft tall iron gate, thick stone walls topped with barbed wire, and a fortified watchtower to survey the scene. The air was thick with the sound of buzzing flies, the black kind that congregates in places where the is rot and putrid remains.

The door was open, so I stepped inside feeling somewhat anxious. To my right lay two panes of bulletproof glass, warped and cracked with bullet holes. Above them lay a headstone, smashed into multiple pieces but still bearing the name of Ylli Muharrem Haklaj.

A house that once stood there has been abandoned. It was demolished and blown up after the family's demise, a sign of the community's hatred for the crimes that plagued them for a decade.

Much has been written about what happened during these years, and there are many reminders as you drive through the region. Bunches of flowers and memorials beside the road are a regular site, sometimes in memory of three or four people, all men.

The reason for this war and many others is blood feuds.

Gjakmarre or 'blood feuds' refers to the obligation placed on an individual to murder to salvage one's honor. For example, if a member of another family dishonors an individual from another family, the former can seek revenge and the restoration of their honor by killing a member of the latter.

Some of the actions that can initiate gjakmarre include killing a guest, violation of private property failure to pay a debt, kidnapping, seduction of a woman, or rape. It can also be triggered by murder. Once the action has occurred, the 'wronged family' will seek out a member of the other family to kill to settle the wrongdoing. But of course, it does not end there. The cycle of revenge can continue and families are living in the North of Albania have been locked in blood feuds for generations.

The government would have you believe that blood feuds are no longer a thing, but it's estimated some 10,000 people have died due to these feuds in the last 30 years. The local people have their own account to tell as well.

"I know a few who are still in blood. One happened just recently as one man killed another, and now his family wants revenge," a waiter in a coffee shop explains to me.

Joining the conversation, another young man explains that it's still happening in other parts of the north, but the authorities refuse to acknowledge them publicly as *gjakmarrije*.

He continues: "Honour is the most important thing to a man from these parts. Honour and family. Without these, what sort of life do you have? You don't. But with these things, it is glorious," he says, holding his hand to his chest.

The young man explains proudly how his grandfather had acted as a mediator between feuding families and saved many from death.

By this point in the conversation, the second man had joined me at the table, a 'makiato te madhe' in one hand, raki in another.

"The government has forgotten us, and everyone wants to leave. Tourism is the only hope

we have left. To do 16 years of school and to work as a waiter is a shame. But we can live from tourism, but only if the river and nature remain," he remarks, sipping his coffee and raki in quick succession.

And he is quite right. Tropoja has a wealth of potential for tourists. Hiking, kayaking, swimming, horse riding tours, agrotourism, work aways, scientific trips and excursions, and visits to historical sites.

A young Tropojan, Visi, with a passion for photography, explains there are 12 castles in the area and many more fascinating archaeological sites.

But if the planned dams go ahead, he explains that at least four of these will be submerged by water and lost forever.

Time for change

This part of Albania has suffered for centuries. Vicious wars between neighbors and tribes, invaders, home-grown occupiers, and the wrath of organized crime and blood feuds. The people that remain are desperate for change.

The only tangible hope for this is building a sustainable tourism infrastructure, much of which will be built around what the Valbona River offers. With construction companies like Genr2, whose owners also run A2 Media, Albania's CNN affiliate and are considered wealthy and powerful, this is all under threat.

But despite this, locals and activists remain hopeful. While the clock is ticking, they hope to work together to fight back and make the world realize just how important this tiny corner of Europe is.

Like the history, pain, and struggles that have woven this community together, so too does the river that cuts through its very core. It touches the lives of everyone, provides sustenance, joy, and a future, and is one of the most constant things in their existence.

To destroy this river would be to destroy the life force that runs through the Tropojan people. It would take away hope and the dream of a better future. It would also dismantle one of the ancient constants that have kept this community together against all odds for millennia.

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