

On the final day of March 2019, Milojko Mandić received a call from his daughter who told him that “the forest is cracking” and “the ground is breaking open”. This was a sign that in his native village Mandići, near Zaovine Lake on Tara, a landslide had started. His life has not been the same ever since.

Milojko and his wife **Jelena** made their way to the village the next day. The road was cracked, so they had to leave their car on a nearby hill and walk down to their house – so crooked that they could not go inside. The house that, as he says, he and his wife built from their teachers’ salaries and where they spent most of the year, was no longer their home. It was hanging, “neither here nor there”, Milojko explained while standing on the ruins of what used to be his terrace.

“It was hard for me, I was broken, believe me.”

Zaovine Lake is an artificial lake, created in order for the water to be extracted from it for the nearby pumped-storage hydroelectric plant Bajina Bašta, but only when absolutely necessary – in cases of failures (on the power grid), power shortages or incidents affecting the country’s energy system. Once water is pumped out of the lake, it needs to be filled up again.

The *Electric Power Industry of Serbia* (EPS) abruptly withdrew a large amount of water from the lake that March, triggering the landslide in Mandići, a geologist has concluded. Experts warned EPS back in 2002 that due to the danger of landslides, the water level should not be brought below 850 meters. In 2019, before this incident, Zaovine Lake was at 831.17 meters.

An investigation carried out by the *Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia* (CINS) shows that even after three years have passed, EPS has not compensated these people for the damage incurred, nor has anyone been held accountable for the environmental damage caused. In fact, a criminal complaint lodged against EPS and its former director has been dismissed.

Locals claim that the company keeps rapidly withdrawing water from the lake, thereby endangering those who live from it, including the lake’s wildlife.

Siniša Jevtić from *Tara National Park*, who takes care of the lake, says that in the 40 years the lake has existed, life has sprung up there.

“Everything around it was created in accordance with the new environment that came to life there, there are new destinations, cottages, rural tourism. When the lake’s water level drops, it [this environment] loses its purpose.”

EPS has admitted its guilt

After the landslide was triggered, the inhabitants of around ten houses that were destroyed left Mandići. There is no life left in the village, Miloško has told CINS. The village cemetery was also moved.

“The dead have been taken care of, but not the living.”

More than three years later, they are seeking justice before the *High Court in Užice*.

They are asking EPS for compensation for the destroyed buildings, forests, orchards and meadows.

Apart from a court of justice, Miloško sought answers from several addresses – he wrote to President **Aleksandar Vučić**, Prime Minister **Ana Brnabić** and former EPS director **Milorad Grčić**, among others. The only concrete answer he received was from Grčić: that they have the right to ask for compensation, and that EPS plans to allocate money for this. In this way, EPS admitted the state’s guilt. However, the residents of Mandići have not received any money to date.

“They say they will take care of it and then nothing happens, we had to sue so as to not be late. We can’t wait, or the statute of limitations will expire,” explains Miloško.

While they are waiting for the court to decide on their case, criminal proceedings initiated by the *Ministry of Environmental Protection* against Grčić and EPS for environmental destruction were quickly resolved – they were dismissed after six months.

In fact, after the landslide was triggered, experts from the *Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia* conducted a special investigation. They found that the landslide also affected private forests and meadows, the appearance of the entire area was damaged, and the road was completely cracked. Witnesses say that because of the landslide near Mandići, ladders were put in place so that the locals could climb down to their houses.

Because of this, the state inspector from the *Ministry* filed a criminal complaint against EPS and Grčić. However, EPS did not extract water to below the lake’s biological minimum, but to 16 meters above it, so Deputy Public Prosecutor **Saša Nešović** rejected the complaint because “disruptions to the ecosystem were not the result of any violation of regulations. Professor at the *Faculty of Mining and Geology*, **Igor Jemcov**, told CINS that there are several factors that can cause a landslide, but that it would be good to follow the recommendations of experts (to not bring the water level below 850 meters).

“It is certainly better if the lake is more stable and has a higher water level,” Jemcov explained.

Nature protection expert **Duška Dimović** believes that the extraction of water from the

lake should be better coordinated with the preservation of the national park, and that the rulebook regulating the “biological minimum” is outdated and inadequate.

“In addition to the amount of water, one should take into account, among other things, the speed and frequency of water discharge, whether the surrounding soil is wet, and other criteria important for the preservation of life in *Tara National Park*.”

She adds that the Rulebook on the Method and Criteria for Determining the Minimum Sustainable Flow is being prepared, a highly important document that should regulate the necessary amount of water in the lake, among other locations. Apart from providing human needs, such as electricity generation, this rulebook would determine the amount of water needed for the survival of living beings. Additionally, climate change will adversely affect the hydrological regime – the lake itself, but also the surrounding habitats where protected species of plants and animals live.

The *Ministry of Environmental Protection* and EPS have both failed to respond to CINS’s questions.

Life not a priority

Zaovine Lake is home to dozens of fish species.

Water level fluctuations have a bad effect on those species, Jevtić from *Tara National Park* believes. According to the latest data, some fish still remain, for example chub, but they weigh less than they used to. Jevtić says that the reason for this could be because they are young fish, and that one of the generations of this species died or their spawning failed.

“If this keeps happening, we may end up losing a species in ten years.”

Ivan Jelisavčić, who is originally from a village near Zaovine Lake, has also had problems with fish. He has a fish pond on the lake and grows trout that he sells. However, frequent water discharges have affected his work.

“When the lake warms up (author’s note: when the water level is lower), I cannot feed the fish as much, so they grow more slowly, and diseases occur due to high temperatures,” he told CINS.

In the disastrous year of 2019, he suffered great damage – as much as 70% of his fish died.

“At the time, I was really on the verge of giving up this line of work,” Jelisavčić recalls.

CINS journalists visited Zaovine Lake this June and saw that it was largely emptied. Locals say that it was replenished following the disaster of 2019, but that it has not been completely full for years, CINS writes.