

Simon is no longer watering cattle from the river ...

Works on a small hydro power plant dried up the Cijevna river bed
in the area of Kelmendi, Albania

Photo

Works in Albania yesterday – Photo: Damira Kalač

Damira Kalač

Simon Nočaj is a shepherd. He used to water his herds from the river Cijevna. Now, he brings his herd of over one hundred sheep to drink from water springs at about one-hour walking distance from his estate, in the region of Kelmendi, Albania.

Kelmendi is a mountainous region at the north of Albania. Almost 60 percent of its territory are mountains, whose peaks are over 2,000 m high. Kelmendi consists of eight villages and numerous hamlets, which are isolated from each other. The population mostly engage in animal husbandry. Most of the 6,000 population of the region lives in extreme poverty.

For Kelmendi locals, just as for Simon, the Cijevna means life. Simon is only one of the residents in this Albanian area who have been left out of water due to the construction of small hydro power plants (SHPPs). The construction of one of several planned SHPPs is underway on the Albanian part of the Cijevna. According to unofficial information, this number of SHPPs is 14. The Vijesti were told from the Albanian Government that several companies were interested in small power plants on the Cijevna, that there were four such projects, but that the permits had not yet been granted. However, the works on the river are in progress.

“They left us without water. They will leave the Cijevna without fish”, says Simon.

The residents of Kelmendi settlements worry that SHPPs will destroy the population of brook trout in the Cijevna. They do not even call that fish “brook trout”, but rather “Cijevna trout”.

According to biologists in Albania, the Cijevna is a river where it is possible to find a genetically pure species of that fish, and the construction of SHPPs could dry up its natural migratory route.

“Maybe the construction of SHPPs will not alter the water level in the river, but these projects will surely affect the fish population of the Cijevna”, says biologist **Olsi Nika**, the executive director of non-governmental organization Eco Albania.

PHOTO

“They left us with no water“: Simon Nočaj – Photo: Damira Kalač

PHOTO

The Cijevna near Dobričine – Photo: L.ZEKOVIĆ

”By HPP construction, a part of the river will be directed through pipes, while a part of the river bed will remain dry. In order to reach its nursery grounds, trout swims upstream, which will not be possible when you dry up one part of the river bed. All of that will result in a decreased population of that fish, not only in Albania, but also on the territory of Montenegro“, says Nika, adding that the same will happen with all other species of migratory fish.

The Kelmendi area has the highest density of flora in Europe – three species are recorded per square kilometre there. The area is full of pastures and rich in medicinal and aromatic herbs – 3,500 plant species are registered here, making one third of the total European flora. Some of them can be found only in the Cijevna valley – although it makes just 0.9 percent of the Albanian territory, over 800 plant species are registered in that area...

”Without water, husbandry, agriculture, is threatened, there will be no conditions for tourism, fishing. Lands where today we have medicinal herbs will be destroyed, flora and fauna of the area in general...Environmental destruction is the destruction of mankind and civilization. What will happen with the residents of this area“, says Martina Volf¹, a French, who has been living in Albania for a decade now, and who advocates the promotion of its northern region in particular...

[Text box 1:]

The construction of small plants must be stopped

Experts warn that the construction of SHPPs on the Cijevna must be stopped and prohibited in the future.

”Kelmendi has large potentials for sustainable development, and the construction of SHPPs is not that. The taming of water into several kilometres long pipes makes damage to natural diversity, but also to the cultural heritage of the area, and has adverse impact on the life of locals, which is being completely ignored when it comes to hydro-energy projects. Nobody has ever asked those people what they want“, says Volf.

Despite having trouble with those who support the SHPP construction after he had been visited by news crews, Simon is determined to fight them in order to preserve the Cijevna: ”I have nothing to lose any more“...

[Text box 2:]

Government learned about hydro power plant construction from the media

The Montenegrin Government learned about the plans for the construction of small hydro power plants on the Albanian part of the Cijevna from the media.

In their first address on the topic, they told the Vijesti that they had not received any official notification about the SHPPs construction, and after that they acknowledged that they would request answers from the Albanian counterparts by diplomatic channels, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹ **Translator's note:** Please note that the names of foreign persons in this translation are transcribed in the same form as in the original articles in Montenegrin, as I could not be sure of their original form.

As stated to the media, the Ministry of Sustainable Development requested complete documentation about a check of environmental impact, in order for the Montenegrin public and experts to be able to assess any possible impact on the ecosystem and biodiversity of the river.

Just as their colleagues in Montenegro, the Government of Albania also reacted to a possible impact of SHPP construction on the Cijevna only after questions by the Vijesti.

In a reply to our news desk, they said that they had not granted any permit for the construction of SHPP on the river Cijevna, although several companies were interested in building four such plants. They also said that the works – not yet approved – would not affect the course of the river in Montenegro, and that therefore, as written in the response by the Ministry for Infrastructure and Energy of Albania, they had not deemed necessary to inform the Montenegrin counterparts about the works.

“Based on the review of the feasibility design, works and technical solution offered by the authors of these designs, there is no anticipated impact as to the reduction of the watercourse running through the territory of Montenegro”, reads in the response to the Vijesti.

Environmental activists, as well as the very Minister of Sustainable Development, Pavle Radulović, said that in this case Albania had breached the international ESPOO Convention, whose signatories are both that state and the state of Montenegro. The Convention binds states to mutual cooperation and sharing of information in case of any works going on in the neighbourhood.

In addition, Albania has also violated the Framework Agreement on Cross-Border Water Management, signed by Montenegro and that state in July.

D.K.