

**Serbia and Republika Srpska laid the foundation stone on May 17 this year for the construction of three hydroelectric power plants on the Drina and shared ownership over them. Among them is the Buk Bijela hydroelectric power plant, the construction of which has been controversial for Montenegro for decades.**

The formation of an expert group of Montenegro and Republika Srpska, which analyzes the transboundary impact of the future hydroelectric power plant Buk Bijela on the Drina, should ensure that not a single meter of the Tara and Piva rivers is flooded in Montenegro, State Secretary at the Ministry of Ecology Danilo Mrdak told Radio Slobodna Evropa (RFE). As previously announced by the Montenegrin Ministry of Ecology, the expert team of Montenegro and Republika Srpska will review the project documentation, structure and planned operation of the Buk Bijela hydropower plant in the next month, and harmonize the altitude of the overflow point, ie the maximum upper elevation to which the future artificial lake can grow.

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**What did Montenegro agree on with Republika Srpska?**

Explaining the agreement with the officials of Republika Srpska, the entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, State Secretary Danilo Mrdak says that these days an innovative environmental impact assessment of the Buk Bijela projects will arrive in order to comply with the ESPOO Convention (UN Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment through state borders), and then a public hearing will be organized in Montenegro:

“From September 1, a public debate will be held in Montenegro on the Document on Transboundary Environmental Impact, as required by the ESPOO Convention. Everything will be publicly available and there is no fraud “, says Mrdak.

National institutions, ministries, agencies as well as citizens should give an opinion on that document, and remarks will be sent to the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which will forward them to the Republika Srpska for a statement.

Mrdak also states that a geodetic survey of the border between Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina has been additionally agreed:

“This is the part where Piva and Tara meet, and where the Drina River begins. And we will clearly see where the elevation of the overflow is and where it is reflected on the territory of Montenegro. Even with catastrophic hundred-year-old waters, when you have enormous inflows that cannot be released and the dam overflows, we will not have a single meter of artificial lake in Montenegro in that situation either. Under these conditions, there are no

problems for the construction of the hydroelectric power plant”.

### **The idea is two decades old**

The idea of building the Buk Bijela hydroelectric power plant on the Drina dates back to 2002. After numerous protests by the non-governmental environmental sector and alarming the international community, several documents were passed.

Tara Canyon is protected from devastation by a report by UNESCO and the World Union for Nature Protection published in 2005, which strongly opposed the construction of a hydropower facility on the Drina that would submerge 12 to 18 kilometers of the canyon, which is invaluable biological and aesthetic value under protection. UNESCO.

Also, the Declaration on the Protection of Tara, adopted by the Parliament of Montenegro in 2005, permanently prohibits any interventions or works in the canyon of this river.

At that time, the Democratic Party of Socialists was in power, which lost the elections in August last year, after which the Democrats, the Civic Movement URA and the pro-Serbian Democratic Front, which has politically close relations with the Republika Srpska authorities, formed the government.

Danilo Mrdak says that the current project of the Buk Bijela hydroelectric power plant is completely different from the one from 2002, when the dam was supposed to be so high that it would flood 18 kilometers of the Tara canyon, ie the territory of Montenegro:

“After Montenegro left the project and the Declaration on the Protection of Tara was adopted, the height of the future dam was lowered in the new project, because we do not want even one meter in Montenegro to be submerged”.

### **Environmentalists against Buk Bijela**

Environmental non-governmental organizations have been against the construction of the Buk Bijela hydroelectric power plant for years, precisely because of the danger that the protected area of the deepest canyon in Europe will be devastated.

Azra Vuković from the NGO Green Home told RFE / RL that it is impossible to prove that the Buk Bijela hydroelectric power plant will not have an impact on Tara:

“We have the opinions of experts and professors from different universities who indicate that the Buk Bijela project would have a negative impact on Tara. We must not forget the fact that the Tara River has multiple protection, is within a national park, belongs to the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere program, potentially a nature habitat. All this could be at risk if the project comes to life, which we cannot accept”.

Representative of the World Wide Fund for Nature in Montenegro (WWF Adria) Milija Čabarkapa welcomes the negotiations between the authorities of Montenegro and Republika Srpska on the cross-border impact of the hydropower plant:

“It is good that there are talks and initiatives from the Montenegrin side to revise the project documentation in order to see whether the hydroelectric power plant will have an impact on Tara. And I can’t comment on what is happening in depth and whether these

negotiations will have an effect, because I don't have project documentation."

### **International Arbitration**

Cross-border influences are a matter of international law, says Professor Nebojša Vučinić for RFE, answering the question how Montenegro could protect the Tara canyon if the construction of the Buk Bijela hydroelectric power plant starts despite potential opposition from Montenegro:

"Other countries cannot perform activities and actions without harming a third country." This is prohibited under international law. The first step is direct diplomatic negotiations with stakeholders. Failure to do so may result international proceedings, due to the fact that the Tara Canyon is protected by UNESCO".

Professor Vučinić says that international arbitration can be initiated against countries that favor the interests of Montenegro by building a hydroelectric power plant:

"Montenegro should analyze the impact of the hydropower plant well and alert the international public. Disputes between Slovakia and Hungary over the construction of a hydroelectric power plant on the Danube were also before the International Court of Justice. So there are these mechanisms".

State Secretary in the Ministry of Ecology Danilo Mrdak says that the project of the Buk Bijela hydroelectric power plant is in the phase of making the main project, ie that a detailed project has not been done yet. He estimates that the actual construction of the hydroelectric power plant could begin in two years:

"We have enough time for this detailed project to take into account all our views and ensure that not a single meter of Tara and Piva is submerged during these hundred-year-old waters".

And in June last year, the Committee for the Implementation of the ESPOO Convention, a complaint against the project of hydropower plants on the upper Drina, was filed by the Center for the Environment and the Aarhus Center from BiH together with Green Home and Ozon from Montenegro.

The complaint states that the new hydroelectric power plants on the Drina River could further endanger the protected Tara canyon in Montenegro, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage List and which is part of the Durmitor National Park.

Source: vijesti.me