

Fury Over Threat to Canyon Isolates Montenegrin Leader

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Potential flooding of UNESCO-listed site unites old political foes.

Montenegrin prime minister Milo Djukanovic has provoked a storm of opposition by backing controversial plans to build a hydroelectric power station in the spectacular and much loved Tara river canyon of northern Montenegro.

Plans to flood around a 12-kilometre stretch of this unique UNESCO-listed wilderness have caused outrage across the political spectrum, uniting friends and opponents of the pro-independence coalition and leading activists to warn of civil disobedience.

Opponents of the plan collected more than 10,000 signatures in one day - a huge amount for a country of roughly half a million. Several parties then joined hands to force a parliamentary debate on the project, which is expected to end in deputies voting for a declaration, demanding fresh legal protection of the canyon.

Unusually, opposition parties were joined in this demand by the Social Democrat Party, SDP, and the Civic Party, GP, both of which are junior coalition partners of Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS.

The rare display of political unity marks an important political precedent in Montenegro, where opposition and government parties have been so bitterly divided over independence that they have rarely come together over any single issue.

The Tara canyon is a national symbol, which helps to explain the depth of the passions activists display over the issue.

"My personal and civic duty is to defend the Tara with more than words," Rajko Todorovic, a painter and activist, told a press conference convened to publicise the fight. "To save the river and the canyon, we will have to launch radical action."

Ranko Krivokapic, leader of the SDP, confirmed he would support a declaration to protect the Tara canyon when it came to a vote in parliament. Equally significantly, opposition parties said they would return to parliament after an 18-month boycott to join former opponents to vote on the Tara issue.

The proposed construction project was "reason enough for us to return to parliament and vote for the declaration", Predrag Bulatovic, leader of the strongest opposition party, the Socialist People's Party, SNP, said. Leaders of the opposition Serbian National Party, SNS and the Liberal Alliance, LS, said they would also vote on the declaration.

If construction goes ahead, the plant and adjacent dam will be a joint project of the governments of Montenegro and the Republika Srpska, RS, the Bosnian Serb entity. While the dam will lie in RS territory, around an eighth of the 80 km-long canyon in Montenegro will be flooded.

Environmentalists have long viewed the canyon as a unique habitat, which explains why UNESCO put it on the list of world heritage sites in the 1970s. The deepest and steepest canyon in Europe and the second

deepest in the world after the Grand Canyon in Colorado, in the US, its crystal-clear, blue-green waters are banked by black pine, beech and corn oak forests. Some trees are up to 400 years old. The fast, foaming waters have recently gained a growing following among tourists, rafting and trying other extreme sports.

The government hatched the deal with the RS to build the plant in spring 2004 and if it goes ahead, construction companies for the tender will soon be selected.

The company winning the tender will finance the dam's construction and in return enjoy ownership rights of the plant and its power for a number of years. Once ownership reverts to the two governments, two-thirds of the power will go to the RS and one-third to Montenegro.

This ratio follows the terms of a former contract drawn up for a power plant between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro in 1990, which fell through after warfare erupted in former Yugoslavia.

The government and its backers insist the project will bring a range of benefits. Slobodan Vidmar, a director of the state-owned Montenegrin Electricity Company, said the construction phase over more than five years would mean jobs for around 3,000 workers. "It will increase employment and what's most important, significantly reduce Montenegro's electricity deficit," he told Montenegro's state TV.

But some experts maintain that aside from the economic and environmental question, the government stands to gain little economically.

"This is a project of the former state, the big Yugoslavia, and is not in Montenegro's interest now," an employee of the Montenegrin Electricity Company told IWPR anonymously. "Montenegro's rivers and canyons would be flooded and the power plant built on the territory of an internationally unrecognized state, [the RS] which would get most of the electricity."

Other critics say Montenegro may have to continue to import electricity even after the plant is built, as well as buying power at whatever price is set by the company that wins the tender. "The government has entered into a project which is damaging to Montenegro in both economic and ecological terms for the sake of the electricity lobby," the influential NGO, Group for Changes, said.

This NGO, which specialises in monitoring privatisation deals, said it would join the campaign to collect 200,000 signatures, obliging the authorities to hold a referendum on the issue.

NGOs are concerned that much of the responsibility for drawing up feasibility studies has been devolved to the RS side. The drafting of a study on the economic and ecological impact of the project was left to the RS government, its state-owned electricity company and potential investors.

But confidence in the probity of RS institutions is low in Montenegro. The media in Podgorica has noted that last year the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia, OHR, dismissed managers of the RS power company, Elektroprivreda, EPRS, after auditors published a highly critical report of the contracts it had signed with the London-based Energy Financing Team, EFT, for the sale of surplus RS electricity. The auditors recommended the voiding of EFT's contracts with Elektroprivreda.

The fact that the EFT is favoured to win the tender to construct the Tara dam has caused alarm in Montenegro, though the company has been careful to rebut the charges raised against it in Bosnia. The auditors' complaints, said Dragan Stojadinovic, a spokesman for EFT in Serbia and Montenegro, were groundless. "Malicious allegations are harming our reputation, but our policy is not to comment on them," he told IWPR.

Whoever wins the contract to build the dam will continue to face popular opposition, however. Miodrag Perovic, a university professor involved in the “no” campaign, said people did not like the fact that business interests appeared to be driving the whole affair forward. “The flooding of the Tara,” he said, was the project of “an interest group, at the expense of our offspring.”

While Djukanovic has shown no sign of backing down on the project, telling DPS deputies not to vote in favour of a declaration on Tara in parliament, other ministers are sounding a more cautious note.

Aware of the ruling party’s political isolation over the project, Planning Minister Boro Vucinic this week assured critics that the government had asked the World Bank and UNDP to help evaluate the potential impact of the project on the environment.

“We shall very carefully, gradually and expertly analyse and evaluate all the positive and negative effects, both economic and ecological,” Vucinic said. “Only a project proved to be both economically and ecologically sustainable stands a chance of being realized.”

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