



# The Vjosa at a Crossroad

## About the deceptive manoeuvres of the Albanian government

It is the purest roller coaster of emotions. As recently as September 2020, we rejoiced together when Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama announced via Twitter, "Our government has declared the upper Vjosa a National Park. Our Ministry of Environment has officially refused to give permission for hydropower projects in the lower Vjosa because that will also be integrated with the Park!" However, there is now once again every reason for concern. A non-transparent process is underway that does not bode well. „It all looks as though Edi Rama won't keep his word. Those responsible are currently discussing a kind of fake national park that would offer the river no protection whatsoever and open the door to hydroelectric power projects," says Annette Spangenberg, Head of Conservation at EuroNatur. Thus, in the plan that the National Protected Area Authority presented for the Vjosa in December, there is no longer any mention of a national park. For the upper reaches of the Vjosa, the category of a landscape conservation area is proposed instead - one of the weakest options of all. For

particularly valuable sections of the river in the middle reaches and original tributaries such as the Shushica and Bënça, no protected status is envisaged at all, even though they are severely threatened by dam projects.

These plans not only contradict the promises of the Prime Minister, but also ignore the wishes for the Vjosa of the overwhelming majority of the Albanian population. The results of an opinion poll commissioned by IDRA Poll as part of the „Save the Blue Heart of Europe" campaign are unambiguous: 94 percent of respondents favour a Vjosa National Park along the entire length of the river. The main motives for this overwhelming approval are „the protection of natural beauty and the landscape" and „better opportunities for tourism development in the region." „Probably the Albanian government is afraid for its image and now wants to appear that it is doing something for the Vjosa. But we will not be silenced by these cosmetic measures. We need the highest protection category for this river and not a dam! Anything other than a

national park would be inappropriate for the Vjosa," affirms Annette Spangenberg.

Albania will hold elections on April 25, 2021. This is a chance for the Vjosa! Together with our partners, we will ensure that the Vjosa becomes an election campaign issue. Voters should know which parties and which leading politicians support the Vjosa National Park. With political will and international support, Europe's first wild river national park could be inaugurated as early as 2023. It would not only protect the Vjosa River, but also provide a huge opportunity for ecologically sound regional development. The future of the Vjosa is at the crossroads.



## Solar energy instead of hydroelectric power

More than 40 hydroelectric plants are planned on the Vjosa River and in its catchment area. The two large-scale projects Kalivaç and Poçem in the middle reaches are the main focus of public attention. We commissioned the International Institute for Sustainable Development to assess the social, environmental and economic impacts of these two hydroelectric plants and to draw up a cost-benefit calculation. The result of the study is unambiguous: even in purely economic terms, the two plants cause more losses over their lifetime than they generate benefits. In contrast, Albania has a huge, far more cost-effective potential from renewable energies that can be tapped to secure the energy supply. This includes, above all, wind and solar energy. A summary of the study can be found on the Internet at [euronatur.org/pressreview](http://euronatur.org/pressreview)

*Success with charisma: In the first ever court case on an environmental project in Albania, the Albanian Administrative Court ruled in favor of the Vjosa in 2017. Picture right: Protest action against the Poçem hydropower plant.*



Photo: Oltar Hrabushaj



Photo: Andi Götz



**“If the national park comes, the Vjosa valley will have a colourful and lively face. If not, it will look damned sad.”**

Photos: EcoAlbania; Cornelia Wieser

## **“The Vjosa has become a part of me“**

### **Five questions for river conservationist Besjana Guri from EcoAlbania**

Besjana, you have been fighting for the Vjosa for almost seven years as part of the „Save the Blue Heart of Europe“ campaign. How would you describe your relationship with this river?

The Vjosa is more than a river for me. I don't stop thinking about it even after work. When I first saw it, I was particularly impressed by its size and how incredibly wide the riverbed is in some stretches. Over the years I have discovered so many beautiful places along the Vjosa. You can drive along it for hours, but you will never get bored. Its dynamics are constantly changing. The Vjosa has become a part of me.

The fact that Prime Minister Edi Rama backed the national park idea at the end of September sounded almost too good to be true. How did it come about?

Recently we have been more ignored than heard by Edi Rama - no matter if we organized protests or asked for meetings. As a result, we have changed our strategy. We have used influential voices to our advantage and no longer focus solely on the prime minister. A little over a year ago, we visited President Ilir Meta with a delegation of scientists and presented him with a petition against the unsympathetic development of the Vjosa River, which was signed by 776 Albanian and international scientists. Ilir Meta then invited representatives of all stakeholders to a round table discussion on the future of the Vjosa and also participated in our inauguration ceremony for the Vjosa Research Center „Fritz Schiemer“. Since then he has supported the national park idea. When he issued a statement to that effect in September, Edi Rama followed suit and announced that the Vjosa is already a National Park in the upper part and the government is working to integrate the lower part into that too. This is how politics works most of the time. Public pressure creates fear for the image.

Speaking of public pressure, the Albanian population is also behind the national park idea. Was the result of the opinion poll a surprise?

We were not very surprised, but we were happy with the way the survey turned out. Moreover, the numbers exceeded our expectations.

One of the reasons we organized the opinion poll was not only to find out what people thought, but also to use the result to increase pressure on the government. We firmly believed that our public relations work over the past few years would pay off, because we have put a lot of effort into it.

Do you have an example from everyday life to illustrate that?

Yes (laughs). I went to the hairdresser recently. Without the hairdresser knowing anything about me, she started talking about the government and said, „Look what they're doing with the Vjosa! We have this treasure, we have this wild river and they want to destroy it. In the end, we will have nothing from it but a reservoir filled with river gravel. There was a woman on TV the other day talking about it.“ In fact, I had been interviewed on Top Channel a few days before. I sat there and smiled to myself. That was a great experience and there are many examples like that now. At the beginning of the campaign, people were still asking us what was wrong with hydroelectric power plants.

Is the idea of a Vjosa National Park something of a political issue?

Yes, definitely. The Vjosa National Park would not only be a huge success for nature conservation, but also for democracy in our country. The general opinion here is that civil society is powerless. If the Vjosa were to be protected after such a long struggle, it would once again prove the opposite. Such role models are important, and we saw that in 2017 when we won the court case against the Poçem hydroelectric power project. It was the first ever court case on an environmental issue in Albania. We received so many congratulations and so many calls. I felt like I had just got married (laughs). Admittedly, the Albanian government has filed an appeal against the verdict, and we haven't achieved our goal yet. But there was a lot of movement: We have become an encourager and role model for other NGOs in Albania. EcoAlbania, as well as other organizations, have subsequently brought numerous environmental crimes to court.

*Text and interview: Katharina Grund; Translation: Iain McMillan*