



Photos: Jan Firnat



On a wave of resistance

The peaceful struggle for free-flowing rivers in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The rivers in Bosnia and Herzegovina are a source of life – but that could very soon be a thing of the past. More than 350 hydropower projects are planned in the country, almost all of them small hydropower plants that would not supply a significant amount of energy, yet cause maximum destruction to nature. Hardly any river or stream would remain free-flowing, and most of the planned plants have no legal permit. At the same time, an estimated 200,000 to well over 500,000 people would suffer from the negative effects of the hydropower projects. This is according to a study commissioned by EuroNatur and Riverwatch and carried out by the Caltus Institute in Namibia. But those responsible have failed to reckon with the local population, and with people like activist Lejla Kusturica and her ally Nina Kreševljaković – a lawyer active in the Lawyers for Rivers network (see box) – who are taking legal action on behalf of the rivers. Whether at protests or in court, popular resistance to the senseless destruction of nature in Bosnia and Herzegovina has never been stronger. EuroNatur and Riverwatch are supporting this growing self-confidence in civil society as part of the „Save the Blue Heart of Europe“ campaign.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, wild and free-flowing rivers still exist. Pictured here is the confluence of the Buna and Neretva rivers. Thanks to the resistance of local people, two hydropower projects that would have destroyed this beautiful stretch of river have been stopped.



Photo: Robert Oz

„Grandma Ana” is 82 years old and has become a figurehead of the protest movement fighting the destruction of the Neretvica. At every protest, she can be heard loudly proclaiming: “You’re not going to build a hydropower plant here! Over my dead body!”



Photo: Amelije Huber

This container is called the „House of the River Protectors”. It’s from here that activists want to organise future campaigns to protect the Bjelava River. Since March 2021, preparations have been under way for the construction of a hydropower plant on this precious river.

“I know that people with hope can change the world!”

Lejla Kusturica

Atelier for Community Transformation (ACT)

The Activist



Photo: Jakub Hrab

“For me, protecting rivers from destruction is a matter of human dignity,” says Lejla Kusturica with determination. She is equally determined that this is a job she has to do. Lejla calls herself a peaceful warrior and is part of a movement that is gaining strength in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For Lejla Kusturica, the name of the organization she heads - Atelier for Community Transformation (ACT) - describes her work perfectly. The 37-year-old is not only concerned with putting a stop to hydropower projects, she also wants to bring about fundamental change in the Western Balkans. She wants to stir people into action and restore hope - hope that they can make a difference. Lejla Kusturica is convinced that experiencing one’s own effectiveness is the best remedy for hopelessness, and that people who have hope no longer just put up with everything. The self-confident young woman draws her strength from nature. Fighting against injustice and standing up for life is something she was born to do.

“What the hydropower lobby fears most is the sight of us working together.”

Even when volunteering was largely unheard of in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lejla discovered, during a stay abroad in the USA, just how much social and voluntary engagement can achieve in terms of making the world a better place to live. Armed with this knowledge, she returned to her homeland. The “brave women of Kruščica” (EuroNatur award winners 2019) are among those who have inspired Lejla to continue on this path. In the women who protected their river for over 500 days with a sit-in blockade against the illegal construction of hydropower plants, she saw like-minded people and positive role models. These are desperately needed in a country where civic engagement is stifled by a government concerned only with serving its own interests. Today, Lejla Kusturica is one of the women driving profound change in the country. “What the hydropower lobby fears most is the sight of us working together. But that is exactly what is happening: we are united! We are united against injustice, against the destruction of nature, against the exploitation of our livelihoods,” she says, describing the slow but clearly visible change that is taking place.

Success for the Neretvica

On the Neretvica River, Lejla Kusturica and her fellow campaigners not only got the construction machines to turn around, our lawyers, including Nina Kreševljaković, were also able to prove in court that the permit for the hydropower plants was not legal. However, the Municipality of Konjic persistently ignored this decision and thus violated the law. At the request of our Bosnian legal team, the inspectorate ruled that the law must be respected!



Photo: Vidan Morinovic

In July 2021, activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia established a Balkans-wide alliance to protect the Balkan rivers. Pictured: at the first meeting in Sarajevo, all the participants agree to join forces (Lejla Kusturica front left).

“The cemetery attendant said: the dead can wait, the river can’t!”

Lejla Kusturica

The power of civil society

Lejla gives a voice to those affected – to the rivers, as well as to the children, grandmothers, fathers, women and men in the villages. “For a long time, they didn’t believe they could take control of their own destiny. However, that is changing,” says Lejla Kusturica. She tells of a defining moment a few months ago on the Neretvica – a river that is scheduled to be blocked with small hydropower plants. What happened there in June 2021 set the tone for the future. When local residents, activists, professors, artists, children, pensioners, men and women all placed themselves in front of the Neretvica River like a wall of stone, Lejla did not hesitate to join them – and she told the rest of the country what was happening. Even the cemetery attendant came to support the protest.

It pays to stand up to injustice

“We have a saying: as long as nobody’s throwing grenades at us, we’re OK. After decades of political mismanagement and repression, people no longer believe it is possible for them to play a part in shaping the future of their country. We want to give them back hope!”

Thanks to the commitment of people like Lejla Kusturica and Nina Kreševljaković (see interview) – one of the lawyers active in the “Lawyers for Rivers” initiative (see box) – more and more people are learning that it pays to stand up to injustice. “Just over a year ago, comments published on the biggest social media portal in the country were saying: ‘There are much more important things than rivers!’ Now, people are congratulating us on our successes against the hydropower lobby, encouraging us, and almost all the comments on articles about our work are positive.” Lejla, Nina and their fellow campaigners are even fighting for a total ban on small hydropower plants in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A historic step for Bosnia’s rivers

Due to pressure from the national and international public, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina announced, at the end of November 2020, that it will no longer provide subsidies for the construction of small hydropower plants. “This is an extremely important step in saving the rivers, because it addresses the two root causes of dam construction: money and corruption,” says Dr Amelie Huber, project manager at EuroNatur. Previously, in June 2020, a historic resolution was passed with the intention of imposing a complete ban on the construction of new facilities in the Federation’s territory. But the law has not yet been enacted. “We successfully stirred the government into action, but now we are stuck,” says Lejla Kusturica. “We have managed to rally a large part of the public behind us, the media are supporting us, and we are winning one court victory after another. However, our wonderful rivers are far from safe. We will not rest until Bosnia and Herzegovina values and protects its rivers.”



Photo: Amelie Huber

The white-clawed crayfish can still be found in the Ulog River.

“Bosnia and Herzegovina is a beautiful country with wild forests, mountains and rivers. I want to protect them; I feel responsible for them.”
Nina Kreševljaković, Lawyers for Rivers

The Lawyer



Photo: Nina Kreševljaković - private

Nina Kreševljaković is active as a lawyer at ACT, at the Aarhus Centre in Sarajevo and is also a member of the Lawyers for Rivers initiative. In an interview, she talks about her motivation and explains why every single court victory is a great victory for civil society.

The “Lawyers for Rivers” initiative

The “Lawyers for Rivers” initiative – set up by EuroNatur and its allies in the „Save the Blue Heart of Europe” campaign – is a transnational network of lawyers who expose hydropower-related breaches of the law in the Balkans and institute legal proceedings against them. In Bosnia and Herzegovina alone, a total of 35 hydroelectric plants were challenged in the courts in 2020 and 2021 – the majority successfully.

Three questions for Nina Kreševljaković

Nina, what motivates you to use your expertise as a lawyer to fight for free-flowing rivers?

The wellbeing of the locals is my basic motivation. Their lives depend on the rivers in many ways and they are distraught when investors destroy their rivers. The river means life for people. They drink the water, they use it to feed their livestock, for their arable land and for recreation. As soon as a river is destroyed, people are forced to leave their homes because they have lost the foundations of their lives.

You have been very successful in your legal fight against hydropower plants in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Can you describe an important case you have won?

At the moment, it is hard to say we have definitely won any case in Bosnia, but we have received some positive verdicts insofar as they are postponing the construction of hydropower plants. I succeeded in bringing the permit-issuing process for two hydropower plants on the Vrbas River to a complete stop because the cases involved were at an early stage. The president of the local community had initiated a collection of signatures in order to enable illegal construction. I thwarted his plans by bringing criminal charges against him and informing the local community council about the illegal activities. After that, the local community council passed a resolution banning the construction of all hydropower plants in its territory for the next 20 years.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina many hydropower plants have either been planned or are under construction illegally. Bringing all these cases to court seems like an impossible task. What makes you continue regardless?

With every court success, citizens' trust in the state legal system grows. I have also noticed that citizens have switched from being passive to being proactive in environmental decision-making processes.

Even more, this has forced governments and investors to act in a more cautious and legal manner. We are actually now in a situation where government institutions have issued significantly fewer permits, and have received fewer requests for environmental permits, because of the cases we have won in the courtroom. It is already evident that the construction of small hydropower plants is in decline.



The construction site for a large hydropower plant on the Ulog River. Along with many other species, the white-clawed crayfish (photo p. 6), the Adriatic trout and the Eurasian otter are all affected by the project. They are losing their basic food resources and even their habitat.



At this small hydropower plant, the Ugar River disappears into pipes. The project has destroyed yet another habitat of the globally endangered Danube salmon (or huchen).

The Local Protester



"The wellbeing of all citizens is more important than the profit of individuals. Let's defend the Kasindolska, let's defend the interests of the citizens!" Sara Tusevljak champions the message on her poster with conviction.

Sara Tusevljak, 24, studies law at the University of Istočno Sarajevo. Together with other activists, she founded a group to protect the Kasindolska River in Republika Srpska which is threatened by three small hydropower projects. One of them, the "Podivič" plant, is already operational and is causing serious damage. In some areas, the river has completely dried up. The Aarhus Centre in Sarajevo and Atelier for Community Transformation (ACT) are among the important allies in Sara's fight. A few months ago, the competent court decided to cancel the environmental permit for all three hydropower plants.

"I cannot stand the thought that the river that flowed freely for centuries might go into pipes because of people who think only of their earnings."

**Sara Tusevljak,
Action Group to Save the Kasindolska**

The Kasindolska River means a lot to me – and to my entire family – because we all grew up on that river. Actually, this river means a lot to all of the citizens from the city of Istočno Sarajevo, because it could potentially be used as a source of drinking water. This year, for a period of several months, the water supply in some of the city's communities was restricted for 8 hours a day because of an ongoing drought. A few years back, none of us would have imagined that. They are using the river, which could provide people with drinking water and flows through untouched nature, for generating electricity – even though Bosnia and Herzegovina is already producing more than it needs.

What frightens me most is not being able to take my kids – once I have them – to the village, and to play with them on the river, maybe not even being able to teach them how to swim. My parents taught me how to swim on the rivers in Istočno Sarajevo. Now all these rivers are in jeopardy because of dam projects. I'm very grateful that I have received a lot of support from other people and organizations who are also fighting to protect our nature and our rivers. We share the same love and passion for our rivers. It feels good to know that you are not alone! We are much stronger together. People who are part of this movement for the rivers are a huge inspiration to me. I admire their strength to fight for what is right, and the fact that they never give up, no matter how hard it gets sometimes.

Text and interviews: Katharina Grund