

EDITORIAL

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DANUBE – SAVA CANAL AND THE EU GREEN TRANSITION

The plan to construct the Danube - Sava Canal (source: Glas Slavonije) has recently been put back on the agenda. The topic was discussed at the last session of the Council for Slavonia, Baranja and Srijem, at which occasion Mr Galić, the District Prefect, favoured the construction as a Croatian strategic project. However, the City of Vukovar as well as the forestry profession have an opposite opinion. We maintain that the project is not in public interest; rather, it is in the interest of private capital supported by the construction lobby, which wants to make profit on the construction and the subsequent maintenance of the Canal. The topic of the Canal had not been discussed since June 2018, when, after a lengthy discussion, the Assembly of the Vukovar-Srijem County omitted it from the Developmental Strategy.

Several conferences have been held on the topic of the Danube - Sava Canal in recent years. Here are some facts: the planned route of the Canal is 61.4 km from the River Danube at Vukovar to the River Sava at Šamac and is divided into four separate sections: the Danube region, the Nuštar Microelevation, the Central Part and the Sava Region. The width of the Canal is 34 m, the water face is 58 m and the water depth is 4 m. The following will have to be constructed: two docks (Vinkovci and Cerna), two pumping stations, four dams, two derivation canals, one siphon, four railway bridges, seventeen road bridges, one footbridge (Cerna), nine crossings of the canal route with pipelines (oil pipeline, gas pipeline, water supply, sewerage, telecommunications), sixteen crossings with transmission lines of different voltages.

Within the discussion of the canal, it was pointed out among other things that in relation to the space, the construction of the canal was only presented for the houses on the route itself. However, almost as many houses will have to be removed from the contact zone as from the actual canal zone (96 houses by the canal itself and 88 houses in the contact zone). This shows that interventions in the landscape and the settlements will not be restricted only to the construction of the Danube - Sava Canal, but “through massive additional measures will extend outside the Canal zone and probably far beyond (planned drainage and irrigation)”. Thus, it can be assumed that other parts of the landscape in the populated area, such as forests and agricultural land, will also be affected. Yet, there is no mention of this in the spatial plan at all.

Ever since the first mention of the possible construction of the canal, the Croatian Forestry Association has opposed this project due to its detrimental impact on the forest ecosystem, and in particular on the Spačva Forest, the largest forest of pedunculate oak in Europe. We have pointed out again and again that the digging of the canal will disrupt the groundwa-

ter regime on which the forests in the Spačva and Bosut basin depend and which are closely linked to the global climate change. In order to obtain reliable results in this area of research, certain time series or actual measurements are required in the present period of the observed climate changes. “As these forests depend on hydrogeological circumstances in the rivers and on their dynamic water regimes, the spatial plan must clearly state the overall interrelated forest ecosystem and its relationship with the water. The selected linear clip of 10,600 ha is not sufficient for the illustration and does not correspond to ecological circumstances.” In addition, the supply of potable water (Regional groundwater supply of «Gundinci - Babina Greda») should also be treated as particularly valuable for protection. “The Canal jeopardizes this strategically important drinking water supply, including its extensive spatial area, without providing accurate data”. It is more ecologically justified and cost efficient to solve the problem of irrigating agricultural areas with gravity from the reservoirs on Psunj and Papuk. F12

Many of the questions related to the project have remained unanswered, in particular those of how the construction of the Canal will affect the contact zones outside the project. Experts wonder whether the construction of the Canal is at all purposeful and possible and what economic importance it will have for Croatia, because “1) Croatia already has a favourable position in international river shipping transport (Vukovar) and 2), the construction of the Canal would encourage competition through Bosnian ports on the River Sava. A cost-benefit analysis is needed prior to determining the plan. Experts are also asking why Croatia should spend 600 million Euro to connect foreign ports along the Danube and thus create competition for itself. Is not it better to run the railway directly from Vukovar to Zagreb, Rijeka or Ploče, rather than first ship to Bosanski Šamac or Brčko, and then continue from there by railway?” What we are most interested in is what will happen to Croatia’s most valuable lowland forests when the level of groundwater, their basic hydrologic factor, drops. Forestry experts express uniform opinion that the forests of the Spačva basin, for example, especially the older ones (therefore, the best quality ones), will dry, because the root system of pedunculate oak will not be able to reach the new groundwater levels.

Therefore, the “new tales” of the Danube - Sava Canal are an invitation to re-engage in well argued debates aimed at protecting our most valuable lowland forests. This is the basic problem compatible with the newly adopted UN Green Transition, which was recently incorporated in the National Development Strategy.

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