



Fact Sheet

The Threats to nature conservation values in Shushica River: Water Supply Project of Himara Municipality

1.1. Background Information

Although Albania is a rich country in water resources, the urban areas, especially the big cities suffer from the poor infrastructure of the water supply systems. There are very few towns that have the 24/7 drinkable water supply for the population.

Since 2007, the overall coverage of water supply has remained the same, at the level of 77.7% until 2021. Compared to 2016, this indicator has suffered a slight decrease as a result of the RAT¹, as this led to the expansion of U&K service area including rural areas with lower coverage. This result highlights the large difference between urban and rural areas. Based on 2019, 2020 and 2021 data from the Monitoring Unit, water supply coverage reaches 94.7% (2019), 93.5% (2020) and 92% (2021) in urban areas while coverage in rural areas reaches 58.3 % (2019), 57.8% (2020) and 57.9% (2021). These values are still far from the objective defined in the FU&K National Strategy, 2011-2017, which aimed at 85% coverage in rural areas by 2017.

While in the new Strategy for Water 2020-2030, the objective is to supply 90% of the territory with the 24/7 drinkable water supply service. In this respect there have been enormous programmes and projects towards construction and reconstruction of the water supply systems in Albania in the last 30 years but the problem appears to be unsolved due to multiple reasons.

This problem becomes more evident in the urban areas along the coastline especially during the summer months where the water resources are lower and the demand for it are increasing due to tourism bloom. Thus, Municipalities like, Durrësi, Vlora, Himara or Saranda are facing significant challenges as regards the drinkable water supply.

In this regard “Water 24/7” has been the latest initiative undertaken by Albanian Government that aimed to provide drinkable water to all 61 Municipalities at least on the urban areas in a uninterrupted service of 24/7 within 2025. The Programme of the rehabilitation of the rural water supply systems comes also within the frame of the objective set in the Water Strategy 2020-2030.

1.2. Project Details

The Rural Water Supply IV program is applied in the municipalities of Himara & Orikum and for the development of tourism in this area of the Albanian Riviera.

The project is supposed to serve over 80,000 residents and tourists that will benefit from the 24-hour supply of drinking water according to hygienic and sanitary standards and from the construction of water supply lines, distribution systems, as well as reservoirs and pumping stations. According to the project developer ADF, it is mentioned also, that this project will have a positive impact on the environment thanks to the construction of two small HPPs in Himara, contributing to the production of renewable energy and environmental protection.

The project has started the planning phase in 2019 with the feasibility study and it has continued with a series of closed consultation meetings mainly with the relevant authorities. The first

¹ Regional Action Plan

presentation meeting has taken place in Tirana in the premises of NEA² on May 20th, 2020, where the EIA³ Department experts within NEA, ADF⁴ and CES Salzgitter GmbH Consultant. The meeting minutes of this meeting are requested. However, it appears that the project has been issued a “green light” by NEA as it has continued further. During 2020 the EIA has been prepared and also according to the EIA Report there has been developed a “Stakeholder Engagement Plan” through which the EIA report and its outcomes have been consulted with the relevant stakeholders. The minutes of these meetings have been requested but to the date there is no document sent by NEA.

On May 5th, 2021 NEA issued the Environmental Permit based on the Preliminary EIA. This would mean that the project has been issued the right to continue with the development without a thorough EIA.

All Permits Including the Water Use Permit and Construction Permit have been issued during 2022. After permitting process the project has entered into the advanced phase of the construction. The Construction has officially started on January 10th, 2023 and it is expected to last 18 months, meaning that the Project is expected to finish in August 2024. The Project consists of a 17.35 km pipeline with the 500 mm diameter, that will divert the water from the headwaters of Shushica River towards Himara Municipality (along the Ionian Coastline). In order to construct this pipeline about 8.5 km new access roads will be constructed. These new roads will serve as access roads and lines main broadcast. In addition to the access roads, 5 storage locations will be used along the pipeline. After the work is completed, the new access roads will be maintained by the authority. Water pipes and will be used for maintenance and other services needed for the main pipeline. The project footprint is shown on the figure 1 below.

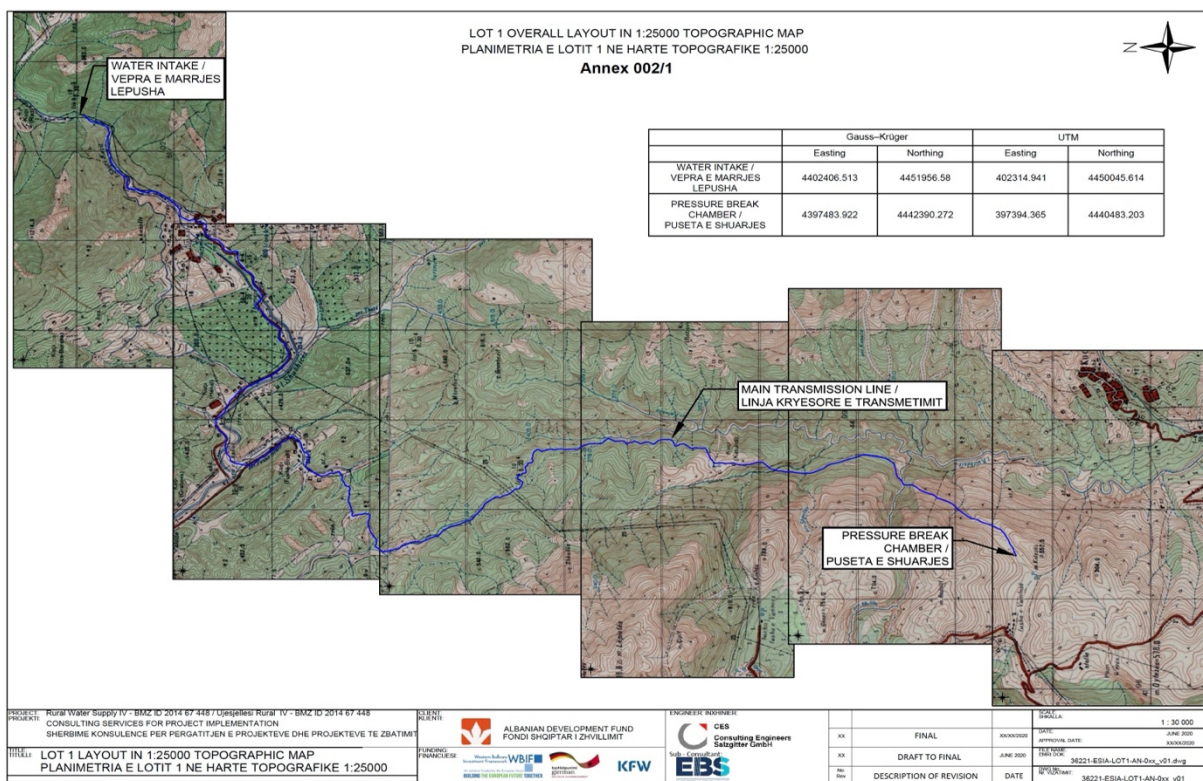


Figure 1: The footprint of the Himara water Supply System © EIA Report of the Project

² National Environment Agency

³ Environmental Impact Assessment

⁴ Albanian Development Fund

- This project is developed by CES Salzgitter GmbH Consultant
- It is financed jointly by Albanian Government and KfW and WBIF
- The ADF is responsible for the project Implementation.
- The construction company is a joint venture between Austrian J.V STRABAG AG and TREMA Engineering 2.
- Total Investment of the water supply is estimated around 9.5 Mio EUR while the entire programme that includes the construction of the sewage water treatment is about 45 Mio Euro.

1.3. State of Affairs

The project has started the construction phase in early 2023 and within 10 months' time it has advanced significantly. One of the 5 spots identified for the project as storage locations is located directly by the Shushica River in the spot known as Lasko Bridge between Kuç and Kallarat villages. This is mainly used as the spot for the pipes storage.



Figure 2: Satellite image of the Storage Location at Lasko Bridge by the Shushica River © Google Earth 2023

Being fairly exposed by the river and by the main road, this station has been the first source of information to local community of Shushica valley towards the project. Before the establishment of this storage location, they had no information as regards the diversion of the water from Shushica. The local community has never been asked about the project during the planning phase that includes the consultation. Along Shushica river there are located around 30 villages where half of them (upstream Shushica) belong to Himara municipality, and the other half downstream belong to Selenica Municipality. It is interesting to be emphasized that none of the people from these communities has ever been asked or consulted regarding the project for the Himara water supply.

Thus, 8-9 months after the construction start, they realized that this project would divert the water from the Shushica main spring towards Himara town and other villages along the coastline. In this

context they raised their concerns in June-July 2023 by sending letters of concerns to Himara and Vlora Municipality as well as to their representative in the Parliament and other relevant authorities. In early August 2023 the locals blocked the construction site of the intake upstream of Kuç village, while a second protest took place in mid-August 2023 at Lasko Bridge where people also blocked temporarily the main road.



Figure 3: The Storage Location at Lasko Bridge by the Shushica River © U. Eichelmann



Figure 4: Local community of Shushica river valley protesting against the diversion of the river, August 2023 © O. Nika

Since the protests the construction works have stopped at the intake location, but it is continued on the side of Himara and Kudhesi stream with the opening of the new road of access and distribution of the pipeline.



Figure 5: The construction of the pipeline route in the middle of the oak forest © U. Eichelmann

After the August protests, the local community has been mobilized and coordinated to increase the opposition towards the project. During September more than 2.000 signatures have been gathered from people in the Shushica river valley community, to support a petition that opposes the diversion of the Shushica water in the frame of the water supply system of Himara Municipality.



Figure 6: The distribution of the pipes along the pipeline route © U. Eichelmann

The community expressed their opposition also during a consultation meeting for the preparation of the Vjosa Wild River National Park Management Plan that took place in Vlora on September 9th, 2023.

In addition to that the community and EcoAlbania are working towards initiating judicial proceedings in the Administrative Court to oppose even legally this project that is not in line with the environmental legislation as well as nit in line with the public consultation legal framework.

To the date the construction is ongoing on the side of Kudhesi stream, and it has stopped at the intake location since the last protest of the local community. In the picture 7 below it is shown the intake location where the intervention aside the Shushica headwaters (right side of Shushica) has been dug for 20 meters a 5-6 meters deep channel that will serve as the intake well. This channel goes below the level of Shushica river, and it sinks all the water to the right side, leaving the main river dry already for few hundred meters.



Figure 7: The 5-6 meters deep channel of the intake on the left side of the Shushica River © U. Eichelmann

1.4. The threats and conclusions

The project for the construction of the water supply system in Himara Municipality is a direct and significant interference in the recently proclaimed Vjosa Wild River National Park. The intake of the water is located on the Shushica headwaters at the underground springs on the river left. Thus, the intake it is located within the National Park where the machineries are conducting the construction works.



The construction phase and the operation are expected to have a severe negative impact on the area's landscape, which is also part of the Protected Areas Network, namely the “**Zerci Oak Forest**”.

The operation phase is expected to have a significant and irreversible impact on the Shushica waterflow and sediment regime that may impact the ecological integrity of the Vjosa Wild River National Park. The diversion of 104 l/s, where the annual average waterflow is estimated to be 139 l/s, is expected to leave the riverbed dry during the summer. Given the fact that Shushica River is flowing mostly on a karstic geological formation, where it is typical for water to sink underground, any diversion of water will have a **significant impact in the longitudinal connectivity of the riverine ecosystem**. In this regard, the diversion in the frame of the water supply system of Himara Municipality is expected to have a severe negative impact in the first 10-12 km of the river from the intake and downstream as well as in the last 10 km of the Shushica flow close to the confluence with Vjosa, from Peshkepia bridge and downstream.

Thus, the diversion project is likely to impact the functionality of the river and will reflect the negative impact in the aquatic and riparian flora and fauna of the river.

Another important point to emphasize is the **lack of the public consultation** during the planning phase of the project. In this respect, no public consultation has taken place in the affected area with the communities that live along the Shushica River valley (in all 30 villages). This has caused an immediate reaction of the local people in the villages from Kuç (far upstream) to Armen (downstream part of Shushica). In this context, the project is being largely contested and opposed by initiating an open conflict between 2 different water users.

The EIA Report appears to be a “fit to purpose” one where all the arguments given within the report are supporting the construction of the water Supply System of Himara by using the Shushica headwater as the main source. In addition, the EIA is not referring at all to the fact that this River could be potentially part of the Vjosa Wild River National Park, a debate that has started already in 2019, where the Albanian Government made its first public announcement towards the establishment of the Vjosa National Park. The information given in the EIA Report is too generalist and it does not describe at all any potential threat or impact on the aquatic life.

The mitigation measures plan that is an integral part of the EIA Report is also extremely poor where almost no measure has been foreseen towards the mitigation of the negative impact on the biodiversity threats, especially on the aquatic and riparian one.

Finally, in the Feasibility study as well as in the public announcement of the project, it is mentioned that an integral part of the **project is also the construction of 2 small HPPs close to Himara**. However, very limited information is provided in the EIA Report on these projects. It is unclear who will run these HPPs and what is their installed capacity.

Finally, this Project is undermining the Vjosa Wild River National Park as a vision but also as regards the expected irreversible negative impact on the nature conservation values of it. Thus, the water supply system of Himara Municipality must find alternative water sources that do not implicate the natural integrity of the Europe's first wild river national Park.