

Struggles against dams and river diversions in Northwestern Greece

(Sarajevo, 27-29/9/2018)

Ioannis Papadimitriou

Ioannina Ecological Organizations Net

As one greek poet wrote “The rivers are the mailmen of the mountains”. So, in the beginning was Pindos mountain chain, which runs through continental Greece and shapes a climatic border between the more rainy western Greece and the rest of the country. Here are the springs of the longest greek rivers, flowing either to the east or to the west. 3 struggles against big dams or river diversions are the most interesting in the area, the first victorious in the past, the second continuing for many decades and the third necessary in the future. I shall describe in brief 2 of them, concerning Arachthos and Aaos rivers in Epirus Region and also Epirus Water Department (for Acheloos case, east of Pindos, there is another presentation).

1. Arachthos

It originates in Pindos and flows to the south into Amvrakikos Golf. Since early 80's there is the Pournari big dam in operation in its lower flow. The initial plans of the State Electrician Company was the transformation of Middle Arachthos in a system of successive hydroelectric dams. That's why the water from Aaos springs dam was diverted to Arachthos after its use. The construction of the first planned, Agios Nikolaos dam, in the mountainous Tzoumerka area was announced in the mid-90's, causing an 11 years struggle by local NGOs and societies, initially against the State Electrician Company and then against a private company. Finally the dam construction was cancelled by the Supreme Administrative Court (Decision 3858/2007 by Council of State).

Two lessons are learned from that struggle :

a) Each fight needs a symbol to motivate people. Our symbol was the biggest stone bridge in Epirus, a crucial element of the cultural identity of the area. People struggled not only for nature but also for heritage protection

b) Any detail can be crucial. In our case the reason for cancellation by the Court was just a small phrase in the Regional Spatial Plan, which did not recommend the construction of new dams in the area for environmental reasons. This phrase was added a posteriori in

the Plan, because we gave the authors the relevant studies, including the great potentials for rafting.

2. Aaos

The transboundary Aaos (in greek) or Vjosa (in albanian language) river originates in Pindos mountain chain, crosses Epirus, then enters Southern Albania and flows into Adriatic sea. The first interference was the construction of a big dam in its basic springs in late 80's. As I said, after its use the most of water is diverted to Arachthos water basin, with serious negative effects. But, before entering Albania, Aaos accepts 2 significant tributaries, Voithomatis and Sarantaporos, so the main problems are restricted in the greek territory.

Last years was also supported a project of diverting more quantities to other basins and specially to Pamvotis lake near the city of Ioannina, which faces serious degradation. The project includes also hydropower stations. According to scientific reviews, the water transfer would make things seriously worse in Aaos ecosystems with minimum benefit for Pamvotis lake. The official promotion caused the local societies reaction and later the project was modified and presented only as a hydroelectric one, avoiding to mention the enrichment of Pamvotis. The basic reason was the Curia (European Justice Court) jurisprudence that the transfer of water to another river basin is allowed only in exception and only in case of use for drinking water, electricity production or irrigation. For the time being the diversion project is frozen. It is not included in the revised River Basin Management Plan, because a change in methodology was applied. In the meantime the attempts for people's awareness continue.

Two are the basic goals for Aaos into the greek territory :

- a) to defence and frustrate any more diversion
- b) to reclaim as more as possible water from the dam in its springs.

3. The new danger for Epirus rivers bears the name of oil and gas extraction, because the greek economic crisis gave the opportunity to big multinational companies to sign contracts with the government. So these struggles are ongoing.