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Bosnia and Herzegovina: Strategic suits filed against environmental rights defenders Sunčica Kovačević and Sara Tuševljak

From 21 January 2022 to 30 June 2022, the women environmental rights defenders **Sunčica Kovačević** and **Sara Tuševljak** received three defamation lawsuits and warnings by company BUK d.o.o. The SLAPP suits (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) are filed against the environmental rights defenders as a result of their public campaign against the environmental impact of the company's hydro-power plants. Additionally, the two environmental activists have been threatened with further legal action.

[Sunčica Kovačević](#) and [Sara Tuševljak](#) are women environmental rights defenders who are part of an informal civil initiative "Stop building small hydro-power plants on Kasindolska river". This initiative has been speaking out against the damaging human rights and environmental impacts linked to the construction of hydro-power plants and showcasing the risks through demonstrations, legal actions, press conferences and photo exhibitions. The civil initiative gained more than 2,000 signatures against the construction of the hydro-power plants and support from the mayors of all three affected municipalities objecting to the construction of small hydro-power plants on the Kasindolska river.

On 30 June 2022, Sara Tuševljak and Sunčica Kovačević received two warnings from the company BUK d.o.o with headquarters in Istočno Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina owned by Belgian-based Green Invest. The company BUK d.o.o operates a small hydro-power plant on the Kasindolska river near Sarajevo, and the investor has plans to build two more hydro-power plants in Samar and Slapi. Since the start of construction, the local defenders voiced concern about the potentially negative impact of the these plants on the Kasindolska river and its surrounding environment, including cutting down forests of high conservation value and soil erosion due to the construction of access roads.

In June 2022, the initiative "Stop building small hydro-power plants on Kasindolska river" celebrated two years and organised a photo exhibition showcasing the environmental impact on the river and the risks of further hydro-power construction. Following the exhibition, Sunčica Kovačević and Sara Tuševljak received two formal warnings from BUK d.o.o requesting to stop to all the activities of environmental rights defence, otherwise they will sue them.

On 7 June 2022, Sara Tuševljak received the second defamation lawsuit against her filed on the 1 April 2022 by the company BUK d.o.o. On 9 February 2022, the court delivered Sara Tuševljak and Sunčica Kovačević the first defamation lawsuits filed by the company BUK d.o.o on the 21 January 2022.

In August 2020, Sunčica Kovačević and Sara Tuševljak together with local environmentalists took legal action against BUK d.o.o and as a result the District Court in Banjaluka revoked the environmental permit for Samar hydropower plant, from July to September 2021 and in December 2021 cancelled its construction permit. The Slapi hydropower plant construction is in the planning stage, the Podivič hydropower plant is currently operating and Samar is currently under construction. Despite the loss of the environmental permits, the Podivič hydropower plant continued to operate, with their permit being reissued in June 2022 by the Republika Srpska's Supreme Court just before Sunčica Kovačević and Sara Tuševljak were law-suited by the company. The women environmental rights defenders with its counterparts have appealed the

decision before the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and are awaiting the final ruling.

Front Line Defenders expresses deep concern at the lawsuits against the women environmental rights defenders Sunčica Kovačević and Sara Tuševljak. It also believes that lawsuits have the characteristics of Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation, which are increasingly used in the region against human rights defenders.

Front Line Defenders call the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to:

1. Immediately drop the unfounded charges against Sunčica Kovačević and Sara Tuševljak as they are motivated solely by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in particular environmental defenders, are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.

Front Line Defenders calls on BUK d.o.o to:

1. Immediately withdraw the retaliatory lawsuits filed against Sunčica Kovačević and Sara Tuševljak.

Front Line Defenders calls on BUK d.o.o's investors to:

1. Immediately halt funding to BUK d.o.o. until the unfounded lawsuits brought against by Sunčica Kovačević and Sara Tuševljak are withdrawn;
2. Closely monitor the situation to ensure Sunčica Kovačević and Sara Tuševljak do not face further retaliation;
3. Make clear through public statements and in communications with BUK d.o.o. that retaliatory actions against human rights defenders are not tolerated.