

Caucasus "land grab" feared in remote UNESCO heritage site

 [reuters.com/article/us-georgia-landrights-dam-idUSKBN15Z1FD](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-landrights-dam-idUSKBN15Z1FD)

By [Claudia Ciobanu](#)

UPPER SVANETI, Georgia (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - For the people of Upper Svaneti, a remote sliver of land nestled high in the gorges of Georgia, the last words uttered by the dying are portents of the future.

And the future looks bleak.

Residents say the same ominous rattle has echoed over so many of its death beds this past year - "The Svans are in danger, be careful" - that villagers are now braced for battle.

The source of their deep unease - electricity.

They say a dam and hydro power plant proposed for the region could threaten the livelihoods of 17 villages perched among valleys and flanked by mountain peaks that soar to 4,000 meters.

In the Chuberi and Nakra communities, some residents fear flooding, others predict the loss of ancient stone houses that have been home to six consecutive generations of their family. A UNESCO World Heritage site, Upper Svaneti boasts spectacular mountain scenery, mediaeval villages and tower houses fit for a fairy tale.

The Svans - as the local people are called - actively nurture links with their ancestors and their isolation high in the Caucasus has cocooned its people and cemented traditions.

The dead are buried in their own front yards and every January, a seven-course feast is cooked for 'lipanael' celebrations when the souls of the departed are invited back into their old homes for a week.

AGAINST NATURE

More than 1,000 Svans live in Chuberi, another 400 in Nakra, and many fear the 280 megawatt Nenskra dam will destroy their ancient culture.

Plans put the dam on the Nenskra river, using additional flows from the Nakra river brought in via a tunnel that would cut through the mountain separating the two communities.

Giorgi Tsindeliani from Nakra, whose family owns land near the tunnel path, is bitterly opposed.

"This is a severe aggression against nature: they are diverting the whole river," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "We already have mudslides here and, with no river to clean them, our lands will be covered in mud. We will be forced to move away."

Projected to cost \$1 billion, the dam is just one of about 100 new hydro facilities planned by the Georgian government.

Georgia's Deputy Minister of Energy, Iliia Eloshvili, expects electricity consumption to grow as the economy expands. He said the government must meet demand with domestically produced hydro power to avoid increased reliance on Russian imports.

"UP TO THE SKY"

A 2015 impact report by the dam's major investor, the Korean state-owned K-water (Korea Water Resources Corporation) identified a need to relocate just two inhabited homes in the power house area.

The report said the reservoir would also flood almost 400 hectares of land, most "state forests" used "intensively by the local population for grazing, collecting firewood, gathering of wild fruits and other purposes."

In the earliest phase of planning, the Korean investor did not refer to the villagers' traditional land rights as these were not formally recognized by the Georgian state.

However the Svan communities soon united and while very few had property deeds, they argued that the two valleys belonged to them, historically and culturally.

Tradition dictates that households own their land from the fence round their house right 'up to the sky' while they shared forest lands on nearby mountains to graze animals and for logging.

The villagers' campaign to protect their livelihood was also supported by the European Investment Bank (EIB), which pressed the Koreans to recognize the Svans' traditional land rights.

A spokesman for JSC Nenskra Hydro, the consortium in which K-water is majority stakeholder, said supplementary studies required by the EIB were complete and would be made public for consultations "in the first quarter of 2017".

Natia Turnava, Deputy CEO of the Partnership Fund, the Georgian investment fund with a minority stake in the project, said investors would offer compensation to all affected residents, whether they had official property rights or not.

Turnava said the project had also been slightly modified to avoid relocating the two homes identified for the power house area and that all those who had been offered compensation "were satisfied".

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The Thomson Reuters Foundation has learned that late last year, when investors were negotiating compensation packages with locals, all the land identified for the dam was registered by the Georgian state under its own name.

This included 600 hectares of pasture and forest beneath the reservoir used communally by the Svans, the two homes in the power house and land owned by families. A law passed by the government last year allowed people to register up to five hectares based on historic use by communities.

However Minister Elosvili told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that land registration by individuals takes time and "for the government to start construction, it cannot just sit around and wait until people get property rights".

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"But we will compensate everyone who uses the land," he said.

Rekaz Tkavadze, a Partnership Fund lawyer, said the state's was "a primary registration" and the land belonging to the two earmarked houses would be given to families once they registered the plots.

He said the promise to re-register lands in the name of local families was not in writing, but would be upheld. Land flooded by the reservoir would be given by the state to the consortium "if not today then in one of the following weeks", he added.

PANDAS IN A ZOO

In Upper Svaneti, residents described the difficult and costly registration process.

They confirmed they had been offered compensation but did not know by whom while those who use land communally for pasture felt most vulnerable as they fear the loss of their livelihood.

School teacher Tamar Chkhvimiani called it "shameful ... We rejected the compensation. We depend on the animals and, if we can't use that area, where will we go to feed them?"

At the time of publication, no information had been made public about compensation or provision of alternative pastures.

Manana Kochladze of the Georgian environmental campaign group, Green Alternative, called the process "land grabbing".

"On the one hand, the state acknowledges that this is people's land and they need to be compensated. On the other, it puts the land under state ownership leaving people no choice but to take the compensations offered or be left with nothing."

Ombudsman Ucha Nanuashvili, who oversees the observance of human rights in Georgia, said he would launch an investigation. "They are using the old methods again ... previously (in the case of another dam, Khudoni) they gave it to the company not to people."

Nato Subari, headmaster of the Chuberi school, questioned the state's right to decide the fate of communities built by "our Svani ancestors".

"We are indigenous and our lands should get protected status. Otherwise, we will end up like the pandas: a few of us left in a zoo."

(Reporting by Claudia Ciobanu, Editing by Paola Totaro and Lyndsay Griffiths.; Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's rights, trafficking, property rights and climate change. Visit news.trust.org)

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