Zaza Vibliani’s family home in the Nenskra valley at the Svaneti mountains. Vibliani, like many people in the valley, are worried that a proposed 125-meter-high dam will threaten his way of life.

(Photo by Tom Allen)

On his land in the Svaneti mountains, Zaza Vibliani shows off his family’s watermill, set inside a tiny hut underneath a stand of pear trees, driven by the steady flow of a mountain stream. It grinds corn that Vibliani has grown on his farm here on the southern slopes of the Caucasus range. Like most families in the Nenskra valley, the Viblianis are largely self-sufficient in food, growing nearly everything they eat beneath these forested mountainsides.

But this way of life could soon change: The area is at the center of a bitter dispute between locals and the Georgian government over one of the largest infrastructure projects in the country’s independent history, the Nenskra dam and hydropower plant.

The $1-billion project is managed by JSC Nenskra Hydro, a consortium jointly run by South Korean company K-Water and a Georgian state partnership fund, and is one of 35 hydroelectricity projects planned for the Svaneti region. The Georgian government hopes that increasing hydropower capacity will improve the country’s energy security – the 280-Megawatt Nenskra facility alone is expected to generate 1,200 Gigawatt-hours annually, or about eight percent of the country’s domestic electricity consumption.

But for Vibliani, who represents his community on the local municipal council, the 125-meter-high dam threatens his and his neighbors’ traditional existence. “The river is the life of the valley,” he said, talking with a visitor under one of the family’s walnut trees. “The company says the flow will be reduced to 5 percent [of its natural output] downstream of the dam. We won’t be able to grow our crops anymore.”

Locals also are concerned about the effect of landslides and avalanches on the reservoir, as well as the risks of building the dam in a seismically active area.

Officials from the consortium dispute this, claiming the impact on the area’s microclimate will be negligible. But Davit Chipashvili, a Tbilisi-based campaigner for Bankwatch, a Europe-wide network of environmental advocacy groups, agrees with Vibliani. “The effects will be much wider than the company admits,” he told Eurasianet.org.

The impact on the wider environment also is raising concern. The valley – home to brown bears, wolves, lynx and 20 species of endemic plants – had been part of a candidate site for the Emerald network of European nature reserves, a project initiated by the Council of Europe, with strict entry requirements for new sites. But last year, the Georgian government redrew the boundary of the protected area to exclude the Nenskra and Nakra valleys. The Bureau to the Bern Convention on European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, in a statement to Eurasianet.org, expressed “concern” about the “drastically reduced”
boundaries of the protected area. An assessment of its impact on the remaining Svaneti site will be concluded in March next year.

Among the valley’s human population, passions are running high. The region’s traditional inhabitants, the Svan people, have a long history of independence and a once-notorious reputation for vicious feuds. Now a group of 15 villagers has sworn a blood oath to protect their land, setting up an “oath committee” to coordinate opposition to the dam. “We’ll do whatever it takes to stop the dam,” Gari Chkhvmiami, the chair of the committee, said, “until the last drop of blood.”

One of the most ambitious aims of the project is to divert water from the Nakra River, in the neighboring valley, via a 12.5-kilometer-long transfer tunnel through the mountain to the main Nenskra facility.

Nakra locals worry about the impact on the area’s burgeoning tourism industry. “I’m not against all development,” said Prezer Gvarmiani, a village resident, sitting next to one of the village’s natural springs, whose mineral-rich waters are ascribed health-giving properties by Svans. “But I want this valley to be made attractive for tourists,” Gvarmiani added. “I would like to do jeep tours to show people the mountains.”

Increasing numbers of tourists have been coming to Svaneti to hike, climb and ski, but Gvarmiani fears the dam will stop the Nakra community from cashing in on the tourist boom. “Who wants to come here to see a wall of concrete?” he asks.

There are also concerns about safety. The company has promised to set up an alarm system giving residents 15 minutes notice if something goes wrong with the dam. “But this is a closed valley - where can you go in 15 minutes?” asked Lile Chkhetiani, an art teacher at Nenskra’s school.

Protests against the dam last year were broken up by riot police, and since late November, locals have blockaded the track into the valley. Zaza Vibiliani was arrested, but released without charge, after being part of the group blocking the road.

Bankwatch’s Chipashvili alleged that divisive tactics have been used to wear down opposition to the dam. He said he has spoken to locals who are paid good salaries for menial jobs in return for supporting the project – a claim that JSC Nenskra officials refute.

The project’s supporters point to the jobs the dam will create during construction. But while local people will be hired to fill the 250 unskilled roles in building the dam, once it is operational, the remaining handful of positions – JSC Nenskra estimates up to 20 – will provide scant employment for the valley’s roughly 1,400 inhabitants.

The future of the project now hinges on a funding decision by the European Bank for Research and Development (EBRD), scheduled to be discussed at a board meeting in January. In a statement emailed to Eurasianet.org, the EBRD rejected Bankwatch’s criticisms, pointing to a Community Investment Program associated with the project, with over US $4 million designated for local infrastructure improvements, as well as job retraining programs for locals. “Affected people have been extensively consulted on the matter,” an EBRD spokesperson said.

About 15 percent of the valley’s population is comprised of internally displaced persons, mainly from
Abkhazia. “We had to work hard to build a life here,” said Chkhetiani, who moved to the region from Abkhazia in the early 1990s.

She said she sees a bleak future if the dam project goes ahead. “People won’t leave at once. But over time, people will go,” she said. “People won’t want to raise their children here. I know what it feels like to be a refugee. I don’t want to have that emotion again.”

Editor’s note:

Tom Allan is a UK-based freelance writer and journalist.