

## PRESS RELEASE

By the Save Sinjajevina Campaign (Save Sinjajevina Association, [Land Rights Now](#), [World BEYOND War](#), [ICCA Consortium](#), [International Land Coalition](#), [Common Lands Network](#), and other associated partners).

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# International organizations urge the EU to block Montenegro's accession until it stops militarizing its UNESCO Biosphere Reserve

- Sinjajevina is the Balkan's biggest mountain pasture, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, and a vital ecosystem with over 22,000 people living in and around it. The [Save Sinjajevina campaign](#) was born in 2020 to protect this unique European landscape.
- NATO and the Montenegrin army have dropped up to half a ton of explosives on Sinjajevina without any environmental, socio-economic nor health public assessment, and without consulting its inhabitants, putting their environment, their way of life and even their existence at great risk.
- Dozens of local and international organizations supporting the 'Save Sinjajevina' campaign demand that the land rights of traditional pastoralists and the environment are secured, opening consultations held with local communities to create a protected area in Sinjajevina, in line with the [European Green Deal](#), and urge the EU to ask for the removal of the military training ground in Sinjajevina as a pre-condition for Montenegro's accession to EU membership.
- On 18 June, 2022, pastoralists and farmers from the region celebrated the Day of Sinjajevina in the capital with participation of local and national government officials and the EU Delegation to Montenegro (see [here](#) and in Serbian [here](#)). Nevertheless, this support has not yet materialized into a decree canceling the military ground nor creating a protected area originally planned to be set up by 2020.
- On 12 July 2022, people from around the world will gather in Sinjajevina to raise their voices in support of its protection and promotion, as well as the cancellation of the military ground via [a global a petition](#) and an [international solidarity camp](#).

Local and international environmental and human rights groups have urged the Montenegrin government and the European Union to scrap the project to militarize the Sinjajevina highlands and to listen to the demands of local communities living from this territory. Nevertheless, almost three years after its creation, the government of Montenegro still has not canceled the military ground.

At the heart of Montenegro, the Sinjajevina region is home to over 22,000 people living in small towns and hamlets. Part of the Tara River Basin Biosphere Reserve and bordered by two UNESCO World Heritage sites, Sinjajevina's landscapes and ecosystems have been shaped by pastoralists over millennia and continue to be shaped and conserved.

Repeated actions by the government of Montenegro to convert a large part of this traditional and unique pastoral territory into a military training ground, led local communities and civil society groups to mobilize, based on scientific research, for the defense of these highly valuable pasturelands and cultures, to establish a community-led protected area.

Several local and international organizations have expressed solidarity with local communities in Sinjajevina. Milan Sekulovic, President of the Save Sinjajevina Association, highlights that "if Montenegro wants to be part of the European Union, it must respect and protect European values, including the EU's Green Deal, the Natura 2000 area proposed by the EU in Sinjajevina, and the EU's biodiversity and natural habitats strategy. Moreover, militarizing the region is in direct contradiction with the recommendation of [a 2016 study co-funded by the EU](#) supporting the creation of a protected area in Sinjajevina by 2020". Together with its allies around the world, the Save Sinjajevina Association launched a [petition](#) addressed at Olivér Várhelyi, EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, urging the European Union to discard plans for the military training ground and to open consultations with local communities to create a protected area as a pre-condition for Montenegro's EU membership.

"In addition to losing access to traditional pasturelands, we fear that the militarization of our territory will lead to pollution, reduced ecological and hydrological connectivity, damage to wildlife and biodiversity as well as to our animals and crops. If our natural resources, traditional products and landscapes lose value, up to twenty thousand people and their businesses could be seriously affected", explains Persida Jovanovic from a family of farmers of Sinjajevina.

"This is an evolving crisis in Sinjajevina's territories of life", stresses Milka Chipkorir, Coordinator on defending territories of life of [the ICCA Consortium](#), one of the key supporters of the petition. "Occupying private and common lands in Sinjajevina, where [a military testing range was opened in 2019](#) while people were still on their pastures, severely threatens pastoralist and farming communities and the unique ecosystems they care for through their ways of life."

"Sinjajevina is not just a local issue but also a global cause. We are very concerned about pasturelands becoming inaccessible to those who have managed them sustainably for centuries, creating a unique biodiversity that would disappear without them. Securing the rights of local communities to their territories is recognized as the best strategy to protect nature and reverse the degradation of such ecosystems" adds Sabine Pallas of the International Land Coalition, a global

network that promotes people-centered land governance and which welcomed the Save Sinjajevina association as a member in 2021.

David Swanson from World BEYOND War affirms that “to recognize the outstanding work that the Save Sinjajevina association has done to defend the rights of local people as a step forward towards building peace and reconciliation in the region, we granted them the [War Abolisher of 2021 Award](#)”.

[All supporters of the Save Sinjajevina campaign](#) urge the government of Montenegro to immediately withdraw the decree creating a military training ground and to create a protected area co-designed and co-governed with Sinjajevina’s local communities.

“The pastoralists of Sinjajevina should always have the last word on what happens in their territories. These local communities have created, managed and conserved a uniquely valuable landscape, which is increasingly rare in Europe, and wish to be at the center of the conservation, promotion and governance efforts of their territory. Instead, they are now at risk of losing their lands and their sustainable way of life. The EU should support secure land rights for local communities as part of their 2030 Biodiversity Strategy” says Clémence Abbes, Coordinator of the Land Rights Now campaign, a global alliance co-convened by the International Land Coalition, Oxfam, and the Rights and Resources Initiative.

#### **FORTHCOMING EVENTS IN JULY**

**On Tuesday July 12**, on Petrovdan (St. Peter’s day), hundreds of people from different countries are expected in Sinjajevina to learn about the way of life of its inhabitants and the importance of its landscapes through through the social celebration of this day along with a farmers’ assembly, workshops, talks and guided tours.

**On Friday July 15**, participants will join a march in Podgorica (Montenegro’s capital) to deliver thousands of signatures collected in the petition to the Government of Montenegro and the European Union delegation in the country.

In addition, World BEYOND War will hold its annual global conference online on July 8-10 with speakers from Save Sinjajevina, and a Youth Summit on July 13-14 in the foothills of Sinjajevina.

## **NOTE TO MEDIA OUTLETS**

Petition

<https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/save-sinjajevinas-nature-and-local-communities/>

Registration to the Sinjajevina solidarity camp in JulyE in Montenegro

<https://worldbeyondwar.org/come-to-montenegro-in-july-2022-to-help-us-stop-this-military-base-for-good/>

Crowdfunding

<https://www.kukumiku.com/en/proyectos/save-sinjajevina/>

Twitter

[@SSinjajevina](#) [#SaveSinjajevina](#) [#Sinjajevina](#)

Sinjajevina Webpage

<https://sinjajevina.org/>

Sinjajevina Facebook (in serbian)

<https://www.facebook.com/savesinjajevina>

## **MEDIA CONTACTS**

For Montenegro media enquiries:

**Milan SEKULOVIC**, President of the Save Sinjajevina Association: [milan.sekulovic.bp@gmail.com](mailto:milan.sekulovic.bp@gmail.com)  
+382 69 831 903

Local community leaders are available for interviews. Please contact **Persida JOVANOVIC** :  
[persida.jovanovic111@gmail.com](mailto:persida.jovanovic111@gmail.com) +38267015062. Images are also available on request.

For American media in English language enquiries:

**David SWANSON**, Executive Director of World BEYOND War, [david@worldbeyondwar.org](mailto:david@worldbeyondwar.org) ,  
+1-202-329-7847

For European and global media in English language enquiries:

**Clemence ABBES**, campaigns coordinator, Land Rights Now, [clemence.abbes1@oxfamnovib.nl](mailto:clemence.abbes1@oxfamnovib.nl),  
+51934946161

For European and global media in German language enquiries:

**Sabine PALLAS**, partnerships officer, International Land Coalition, [s.pallas@landcoalition.org](mailto:s.pallas@landcoalition.org),  
+393389424414

For European and global media in French language enquiries or scientific data:

**Pablo DOMINGUEZ**, Environmental Anthropology Senior Researcher at CNRS (France), Laboratoire  
Géographie de l'Environnement (GEODE), CNRS / Université de Toulouse 2, email:  
[eco.anthropologies4@gmail.com](mailto:eco.anthropologies4@gmail.com) +34653910230

For European and global media in Spanish language enquiries:

**Jorge PELLICER**, communications and campaign manager, email: [jorge.m.pellicer@gmail.com](mailto:jorge.m.pellicer@gmail.com),  
+34622856187