

## International Workshop

# Biodiversity and Nature Conservation in the Western Balkans – Civil Society, (Local) Politics, International Actors, and the Media in Dialogue

**Organization:** Southeast Europe Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft), München / EuroNatur, Radolfzell. Supported by the German Federal Foreign Office

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*Report by Hansjörg Brey, Seefeld-Hechendorf / München<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

The Western Balkan countries have a high degree of biodiversity, unique in Europe. Yet, probably more than elsewhere, this biodiversity is under threat. The Mediterranean region, as stated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), will be particularly affected by climate change and is defined as a primary “hot spot” with possibly devastating effects on biodiversity. All six Western Balkan states wish to join the EU and are now in different stages of accession and integration. Chapter 27 of the Acquis Communautaire concerning environment and climate change includes nature conservation and is probably one of the most demanding parts of the EU Accession process. In this situation, the European Union provides strategies and tools aimed at changing the situation to the better. Within the European Green Deal, the European Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 provides guidelines in this direction. On 6 October 2021, the European Council adopted the Green Agenda Action Plan for the region, also directed at projects for the protection of nature.

The workshop was held against this backdrop. Hansjörg Brey, then executive director of the SOG, and Gudrun Steinacker, vice president of the SOG, headed the conference together with Gabriel Schwaderer, executive director of Euro-

Natur. The conference was part of an ongoing project under the same topic and supported by the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe via the German Federal Foreign Office. It aims at strengthening a constructive cross-societal and cross-border dialogue on issues of nature conservation in the Western Balkans. Suggestions and demands will be addressed to local and international actors. The long-term aim is to enhance awareness for the issues of protecting nature and the environment within the political discourse in the Western Balkan countries and to contribute to sustainable solutions.

The workshop gathered experts from civil society, academia, the local government, line ministries, relevant international organizations, the European Commission, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and representatives from the media, from both the Western Balkans region and Western Europe. *Christiane Hullmann*, head of the Western Balkans Division in the German Federal Foreign Office, *Thomas Potthast*, president of EuroNatur, and *Manuel Sarrazin*, German Federal Government Special Representative for the Countries of the Western Balkans and President of the SOG, contributed with introductory remarks and words of welcome. The most important findings of the workshop are summarized in the following.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The author is extremely grateful to Sissi Samec who prepared the conclusions at the end of the event and drafted the protocol of the workshop. A special thanks to Gabriel Schwaderer and Gudrun Steinacker for their most valuable suggestions and editing of the text. This is the abridged version of the report that can be found on the SOG website: [www.sogde.org/site/assets/files/22858/report\\_workshop\\_sog\\_euronatur\\_24\\_25\\_march\\_2022.pdf](http://www.sogde.org/site/assets/files/22858/report_workshop_sog_euronatur_24_25_march_2022.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> A long version of the report, a program of the workshop and three background papers are available on the website of the SOG, [www.sogde.org](http://www.sogde.org).

## The Current State and Potentials of Biodiversity and Nature Conservation in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkan countries, with four so-called biogeographical regions, possess a high degree of biodiversity. Ecosystems are still in a good shape, with well-preserved forest areas, lakes and rivers. There is a high degree of endemism of fauna and flora, there are many protected areas (PA) of European interest, including so-called Emerald Sites of Special Conservation Interest. There were many examples given to demonstrate this unique quality: Lake Ohrid is the deepest and oldest lake in Europe hosting the highest biodiversity index in the world and is considered a "museum of living fossils", Vjosa River in southern Albania is often called "Europe's last wild river", and very recently, with the establishment of the Sharr Mountains National Park in Northern Macedonia, the biggest national park area in Europe was declared in the border region of Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania.

This biodiversity (in and outside of protected areas) is under threat, due to ongoing projects in building infrastructure, energy production, use of forest and water resources, intensive agriculture, mining, and tourist development. According to hydro-morphological assessments of the rivers in the Balkans, these possess great ecological values which are threatened by hydropower development. A map shows 1.480 hydro power plants (HPP) existing, 108 under construction and 3.431 planned in (Western) Balkan rivers. Most of them produce less than 1 MW but are heavily damaging the environment.

Authoritarian tendencies, state capture, weak rule of law, wide-spread corruption and clientelism – these circumstances are threatening a proper management of natural resources and obeying the EU and other international rules in environmental protection. There is also a low public awareness for the necessity of nature conservation which is often seen as a costly alternative to development – there is a long way to go until nature conservation is seen rather as an investment in resources than a waste of funds.

### Biodiversity and Climate Change

According to recently presented facts and findings of the IPPC (2021) and the IPBES Global

Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, the loss of biodiversity and climate change (CC) are parallel processes. CC is one of the main drivers of biodiversity loss. The destruction of ecosystems undermines nature's ability to adapt to climate change. The loss of biodiversity is threatening the survival of mankind equally as global warming. After all, marine and terrestrial ecosystems sequester 60 percent of global annual anthropogenic carbon emissions. The crisis and loss of biodiversity means a triple challenge, also in the Western Balkans: first, finding effective ways to curb the ongoing extinction of species; second, creating public awareness on the urgency of preserving biodiversity (to be followed by political action); and third, the preservation of biodiversity must be mainstreamed in other policies.

### Nature Conservation and Sustainable Use

The case study from Vojvodina Province in Serbia "Bosut Forest Area – Integrating Ecosystem Services in the Protected Area Designation & Management" shows quite impressively that traditional land use and integrated management can positively contribute to sustainable development. The Bosut Forest Area is of great ecologic and social importance and has a high potential for the generation of local income. Several ecosystem services were established, covering food (meat) production, timber production, moderation of extreme events (flood control) and maintenance/protection of habitats and species. The topics were addressed to key stakeholders and public consultations were organized, elaborating links between sectors showing both positive and negative interactions (tradeoffs and synergies). Work with the media was also seen as key to a successful project.

There are indeed different – and partly controversial – approaches to the question of how to achieve a sustainable protection of nature and biodiversity. The role of forestry provides a good example: According to many experts and activists, the best strategy, also for tackling the climate emergency, is non-intervention in the forests, the strict protection of primary and old-growth forests. This approach also refers to the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. According to others, the question of forest use should avoid the narrative of allowing either zero or 100 percent

of intervention. Research shows how important the maintenance of key habitats is, also considering the management of invasive species. According to another argument, all people in Europe live in cultural landscapes, which have been created and managed by the interaction between people and nature. The focus should thus be rather on circular economy and questioning the current system of growth, free trade, and globalization. As one participant stated: "We have to rethink the whole system, otherwise questions to protect or not protect don't make any sense."

### The Role of the EU

As all countries in the region are committed to become members of the European Union, the EU regulations and especially chapter 27, the so-called "environmental acquis", are a crucial orientation for the politics of nature conservation.

The European Green Deal (GD) with the European Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 provide guidelines in this direction. In October 2021, the European Council adopted the Green Agenda Action Plan for the region, prepared under the guidance of the Regional Cooperation Council. The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GA), as part of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, adopted by the European Commission, is supposed to provide substantial funds, also directed at projects for the protection of nature.

Experts and activists are investing great hopes into the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, setting ambitious goals, amongst others the protection of old growth forests and the restoration of ecosystems. It was mentioned, though, that the funding for the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 has not yet been decided. The question of which instruments the EU should use to support WB countries in nature conservation was discussed. The EU accession tool is not perfect, but the best one available, as one participant said. The EU Delegations in the region and the European Commission (EC) show a commitment to push the GD, but with the war in Ukraine the situation has become more difficult.

### The Green Agenda for the WB and the Green Agenda Action Plan

There was an intense discussion on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GA), adopted by the EC, and specifically on the Green Agenda Action Plan (AP). Contrary to promises and expectations, civil society organizations (CSOs) were not involved properly in the preparations. The AP contains a mixture of 58 measures with a lot of strategies, documents and reports not going beyond accession obligations. These measures are not really synchronized or bound to certain benchmarks in the accession process. Enforcement of the process is lacking. Many activities are measured by continuous progress until 2030 and are not broken down to manageable measures. Some fundamental issues in terms of biodiversity and the adoption of the Birds and Habitats Directives, are missing. The GA has not really been aligned with the Economic and Investment Plan, as it was supposed to be. Whereas several infrastructure projects have been approved and financing has been provided for "grey infrastructure" (such as road constructions), "unfortunately, there is no money behind the Green Agenda", as one participant stated.

Another problem is the lack of viable projects. Regional governments have the responsibility to have project proposals on the table; so far, no "green" projects are on the list to the EU. Several road constructions are in the pipeline, but no urban / public transport proposal. Here the EC should give clear guidance. There were serious doubts about the role / performance of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) that was designated to monitor the whole process but – according to observers – has so far not been visible or active enough. Hope was expressed that Germany will further be engaged in strengthening the Berlin Process, giving CSOs a voice, and including issues of biodiversity / nature conservation.

### The Role of Civil Society Organizations / the Public

The civil sector is certainly key to successful nature conservation. The case of lithium mining (by the company Rio Tinto) in Serbia provides a strong example, that shows how politics can be influenced by a strong, meaningful bottom-up

approach. In the Rio Tinto case, there were strong and coordinated civil protests through which the environment became a topic in the political agenda. There are lessons to be drawn from it: CSOs must build up an effective mechanism to prevent such projects in an early stage. To build up expert capacity of CSOs is crucial. It was mentioned that technical experts within the government bodies also play an important role. Unfortunately, often these experts must keep silent. A close cooperation on all levels should be envisaged.

In general, in the last couple of years, the public has become more informed and aware, starting mostly with the issue of small HPPs across the region, leading to an “avalanche” of public pressure on governments. Public protests function as “game changers”.

### **Domestic and Trans-border Cooperation in Nature Conservation: The Example of Sharri / Shar / Korab-Koritnik Mountains**

Regional cooperation (meaning international cooperation) is a necessity for enhancing nature conservation. Major achievements mentioned were the Green Belt Initiative and the Parks Dinarides, a network of protected areas in the wider region. Countries of the region also engage in the Biodiversity Task Force led by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and in the EU Environment Partnership Programme for Accession (EPPA). Whether these bodies are functioning properly or not was not an issue of discussion. BioNet Network, a regional initiative and platform, was established in 2016 and supported by the German GIZ. Since 2021, when GIZ funding phased out, BioNet has been struggling to stay alive and is looking for new funds. Here, as elsewhere, the notorious problem of donor driven activities and the sustainability of project activities after the phasing-out of a project cycle could be discussed further.

The focus of the participants' discussion was on domestic and transboundary issues. It was agreed to discuss the example of Sharri / Shar / Korab-Koritnik Mountains, as a series of Protected Areas (PAs) spreading over three countries (Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia). Fortunately, the panelists came from all levels

(government, national park administration, academic institutions, local administration, CSOs and the international (donor) community (UNEP)).

The Shar National Park was proclaimed in North Macedonia in 2021. For decades, local NGOs together with many international actors (Euro-Natur, UNEP, GIZ, WWF, and others) fought for the Shar Mountains to become the biggest transboundary protected area in Europe with around 2.400 km<sup>2</sup> together with Sharri NP in Kosovo, Mavrovo NP (also in North Macedonia) and Korab-Koritnik Nature Park in Albania. UNEP monitored the process in North Macedonia. The importance of public campaigns involving the local people and a massive media coverage was highlighted.

While international donors may provide necessary means and consultancy, local NGOs and local communities must engage with a long-term approach which is key for a proper functioning of PAs, as was demonstrated with communal activities in Prizren/Kosovo. With “development” being a priority for the local people rather than nature conservation, sustainable development and “green employment” are key, with sustainable tourism being an important part of it. In Prizren, local authorities have joined citizens' and NGO activities in stopping illegal building and the construction of a HPP in the NP area. Ideally, national, and local governments, PA administrations and NGOs join forces in protecting nature, especially in PAs proper. As concerns PA administration, proper staffing with qualified people is of key importance. As an example, the directorate of Sharri National Park in Kosovo is severely understaffed, trying to fight illegal logging, hunting, construction activities and fire making, instead of wildlife monitoring and cooperation with NGOs. In general, the management of PAs requires support by qualified staff, training, a sound budget, and monitoring – not least to prevent PA staff from being involved in illegal activities themselves.

Model projects such as “Sustainable Future for Shar/Korab-Koritnik Region” are working with a clear trans-boundary approach. Some well-established CSOs from Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia are closely cooperating by following



Lake in Sharri National Park, Kosovo. Photo: Hansjörg Brey, 2019

a multiple development approach. Activities include:

- contributing to regional development by working with / mobilizing local people and stakeholders, establishing local action groups; working with a bottom-up approach;
- aiming at an improvement and diversification of income sources, agri-rural development, cherishing traditional forms of land management (traditional farming, sheepherding, etc.); examples include plant processing, beekeeping, promotion of nature friendly tourism;
- forest management, climate change and natural resource management, renewable energy;
- awareness raising, promotion of natural values, education, and capacity building.

### Nature Conservation in the Western Balkans: Success Stories and Challenges

Short reports were given by representatives of CSOs on the situation of nature conservation in individual countries of the Western Balkans, analyzing relevant actors, conflicts of interest and the state of protection. Problems are manifold, including the unsustainable usage of hydropower, building / tourist infrastructure in

coastal and mountainous areas, traffic infrastructure (roads and airports), illegal logging and poaching, waste, wastewater, and sewage. Participants were asked to report about the most pressing issues in their respective country. It became clear that excessive and unsustainable hydropower development (HPP), mostly with small HPPs, is the most pressing issue in the region.

Albania: Nature Conservation is under extreme pressure in Albania. Whereas protected areas have nominally increased, there are no more strict reserves; wetlands and coastal areas are reduced, some PAs have been completely removed from the map without any ecological explanation. Most striking is the case of the planned Vlora International Airport in the delta area of Vjosa River and related infrastructure, such as a marina and hotel resorts. These projects are reportedly supported on the highest political level, with dubious financing, and imply a clear infringement of Albanian and international law.

Concerning HPP construction, Albania is the champion in the region. Most disputed is Vjosa River where 40 HPPs were planned. Protests against the destruction of Vjosa are substantial,

supported by national and international experts. CSOs recommended a three-year moratorium on HPP in Vjosa, working on viable concepts for the use of energy resources and promoting eco-tourism as a form of sustainable development. Activities of CSOs and their fight for a status as a national park received supportive statements from the European Parliament and the EU Commission. On 13 June 2022, there was a breakthrough for the "Save the Blue Heart of Europe" coalition in the protection of Vjosa River, when Albanian Prime Minister Rama and the CEO of Patagonia Company signed a memorandum to designate the entire Albanian part of the river a national (river) park.

**Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Bosnia and Herzegovina has abundant nature resources, a rich biodiversity and high endemics. Nevertheless, only three percent of the country are under protection. According to NGO representatives, nature is not sufficiently respected on the governmental level. Often the legal framework is not applied, there is no transparency and people are not involved in planning processes, e.g., EIA. All 244 rivers are endangered by HPP construction, more than 500 HPPs are still planned with a devastating impact on the environment. Nevertheless, more and more citizens are fighting for their environment, mostly against HPP, for example "The Brave Women of Kruščica". The "fight for rivers" is one of the most inspirational stories – the people protesting are facing repressions but nevertheless take to the streets. There is a "Coalition for the Protection of Rivers in BiH" (about 30 organizations) on state level, including from the Republika Srpska – therefore the river movement seems to unite the entities in BiH. Environmental activists in BiH finally gained a major success in early July 2022, as the parliament of the Federation formally banned the construction of new micro-dams along the entity's waterways.

**Kosovo:** In Kosovo, the problem of small HPPs can be demonstrated in an exemplary way. Recently, the number of small HPPs has been increasing rapidly, with currently 77 locations in Kosovo. Yet, HPP is only providing a low per-

centage of the energy production. For small HPPs a maximum of 70 percent of water extraction is allowed by law, but often up to 100 percent is taken. As reports from CSOs suggest, companies from EU countries are investing in small HPP constructions with considerable profits, following untransparent procedures. The case study of Austrian company KelKos in Lumbardhi River near Deçan is exemplary. In another project by Matkos Group in Brezovica / Stërcë / Lepenc / Durla, five HPPs were built and led to heavy damages of the landscape, partly by extensive road constructions. HPP is heavily affecting access to water for locals and construction took place under protests. Despite of a moratorium on HPP announced by the new government in Prishtina, threats on activists have continued. Kosovo is seeing a growing awareness as civil society is raising its voice and activists are receiving increasing international support.

**Montenegro:** The energy produced originates to 55 percent from HPP, 36 percent comes from burning lignite in Pljevlja (210 MW), and the rest from wind and solar energy. Pljevlja is planned to close in 2035 and the state energy company EPCG is looking for substitutes. Therefore, also in Montenegro, hydropower is an issue at the top of the agenda, as demonstrated by the case of the *Komarnica* river flowing through one of the deepest canyons in Europe. Although national and international protection mechanisms are in place, the EPCG reportedly plans to erect a huge dam. The installation is supposed to yield three to four percent of total national energy production.

The presentation "Ulcinj Salt Works – Montenegro's Litmus Test for EU Chapter 27 Accession Negotiations" looked back at the history of the "Salina". It is a case of criminal destruction of a once successful salt production and habitat of a unique bird population. The proclamation of a nature park by the municipality of Ulcinj and designation as a Ramsar site in 2019 were a great success.<sup>3</sup> The European Parliament's resolution in 2016 had been the turning point in this case. The strong support from diplomats, the EU

<sup>3</sup> The Ramsar Convention was signed in Ramsar, Iran in 1971. It is an international treaty that provides the framework for conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources.

Delegation and the European Parliament helped to set the protection of the Salina as a benchmark for closing chapter 27. The current situation is still worrying: Decaying salt plant infrastructure, loss of qualified personnel and a lack of tourist infrastructure are some of the issues to be solved. Germany is financing an expert for developing a sustainable management plan for the Salina with the government and the municipality. The Salina case could be a model for other countries in defining nature protection issues as a benchmark in the process of EU accession.

**North Macedonia:** The case study of North Macedonia highlighted the “World Natural and Cultural Heritage Ohrid Region”. This transboundary region has formed the Biosphere Reserve Ohrid-Prespa since 2014, parts of it are Emerald sites and Key Biodiversity Areas. The National Park Galicica, situated between Lakes Ohrid and Prespa, also holds high biodiversity numbers and is under several national and international protection regimes. But this protection faces great challenges from solid waste, lake pollution through wastewater, invasive species, over-fishing, poaching, fluctuating water level, tourism pressures by boat tourism, building touristic complexes in the zone of strict protection, illegal construction, and urbanization. Despite impressive and professional NGO activities the situation reportedly has not changed, irrespective of changes in the government.

**Serbia:** Small HPPs in Serbia were established in 2000 as a strategic element of energy transition – even supported by NGOs – as a way to reach sustainability. When the first installations were built, the results became obvious: damage is extreme and gains not really visible. Already 110 HPPs were built, mostly in highly sensitive areas, including PAs. A new law on nature protection does not allow the installation of HPPs in PAs unless it is proclaimed as public interest. This ban is problematic as it is the government who proclaims the interest. State incentives make HPP very profitable, with a high return in capital, opening doors for corruption. The NGO “Polekol/Pravonavodu/Right to water” is informing local initiatives and helping them file lawsuits; the main idea is to build a united environmental front. Together

with representatives from other countries the “Balkan River Defence” initiative was created, as well as the “Women in Environment” initiative.

The illegal killing of birds and the trapping of singing birds was another case presented by a Serbian NGO. International help is urgently needed and there was a demand for a regional team in the Western Balkan countries working for the protection of birds.

### Biodiversity und Nature Conservation: The Role of the Media

Journalists from both international and regional media were present, some of the latter specialized in environmental issues. As concerning the role of the media, environment is not a topic in conventional journalism in the region. Topics preferred are crime, corruption, and political events. How can journalists make biodiversity and nature protection an issue for their reporting, how can they address the audience and explain why it matters? What does it need to bring to a broader public the values of the rich biodiversity in the Balkans but also how endangered it is? Recently, more articles and films about the beauty of landscapes, air pollution and the “plastic issue” have been reaching the audience in the WB 6. People in the region are more and more informed and interested in the environment, as much as it becomes a burning issue. Yet, environmental issues other than nature protection, such as pollution – mostly air pollution – receive far more attention from the citizens. In order to change this situation, for NGOs the cooperation with media is key.

Media people require time and financial resources to get into the topic and engage in a learning process. Moreover, working conditions of journalists are not the best – it is hard to write good articles under time pressure and with low payment. On paper, good laws exist on public information, but this is not the case in reality – media people do not receive the information required on time. Serbia was mentioned where it is nearly impossible to receive information from institutions as public servants are often scared to lose their job if they provide relevant information. Journalists often must fear for personal security because people who

want to hide something are sometimes ready to use violence.

The importance of networking for investigative journalists as well as solidarity among journalists was highlighted; networking with dedicated journalist unions to protect the work of the journalists and their personal safety should be encouraged. Alternative media channels should be empowered, and the opportunities offered by new technologies should be used. As an example, Citizen Channel, an online media for young people based in Tirana, is trying to communicate “underreported” topics. Working with communities is key for them. Topics often are air pollution, HPP issues, and other environmental topics, sometimes including crime and corruption.

### Perspectives, Options for Further Action, and Further Steps

These are some of the main conclusions from the conference:<sup>4</sup> The conference participants have great expectations in the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GA). Yet, there is a great concern that concrete benefits, especially for enhancing projects in nature conservation, are lacking. There were serious doubts about the role / performance of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) that was designated to monitor the GA process but – according to observers – has not been visible or active enough so far. The European Commission should ensure that the process is properly monitored in the future, including all stakeholders, such as regional CSOs.

Empowering of CSOs is key. Initiatives already exist, and challenges are, more or less, the same in the entire region. Thus, regional cooperation is a must. Hope was expressed that Germany will further be engaged in strengthening the Berlin Process, giving CSOs a voice, and including issues of biodiversity / nature conservation. Climate change (CC) and biodiversity are deeply inter-linked, and one cannot be tackled without considering the other. The fight for preserving biodiversity and against CC has to be coordinated; concerted and quick actions are needed.

A new approach to nature protection is needed – nature conservation should be regarded as an investment in the future. If this generation fails, this will cause irreversible damage and costs at the expense of generations to come – this is the main message to decision makers. The crisis and loss of biodiversity means a triple challenge, also in the Western Balkans: first, finding effective ways to curb the ongoing extinction of species; second, to create public awareness on the urgency of preserving biodiversity; and third, the preservation of biodiversity must be mainstreamed in other policies.

The unsustainable use of hydropower seems to be a systemic problem in all WB countries, it's described as sweeping over the region like a pandemic wave with a pattern behind it: a lack of transparency and corruption are issues here.

Protected area management is a fundamental problem in all countries; in general, weak management is notorious, and there is urgent need for improvement.

Counteracting illegal activities as regards the usage of natural resources, be it killing of birds, poaching, timber extraction, illegal construction, etc. needs better monitoring, enforcement of laws and legal prosecution.

There is a potential clash between energy transition and nature conservation as renewable energy sources (mostly hydropower and biomass) may contradict nature conservation. This situation calls for cooperation between CSOs active in nature protection on the one hand and air pollution / energy transition issues on the other.

As has been demonstrated with the example of the Shar / Sharri National Park, cooperation between national and local authorities, protected areas management, local citizens and CSOs, and international donors is key to successfully protecting nature.

As concerns communication, nature conservation / protection activities should be a message

<sup>4</sup> Mainly based on the contributions of our panel chairs and compiled and presented during the event by Sissi Samec.

conveyed to people on the highest possible level; governments are not “monolithic” and technical experts can be allies of civil society; furthermore, we (the conference participants) must adapt our messages to the specific target groups.

There was an agreement that we must engage on all levels (EU, national, local) and with all stakeholders (whether they are nature-friendly or opponents) and all stories heard during the presentations prove: “if we work together, we can make a difference”. Statements such as “making local people proud in managing their area in a nature-friendly way” should motivate us to move on in this direction.

The role of women should not be underestimated – as the example from BiH shows. There, eco-movements such as the “Coalition for the Protection of Rivers of BiH” are also transcending boundaries of entities.

Media can and must play an important role in enhancing nature protection in the Western Balkans. The potential role of media is multiple: (1) to bring to a broader public the values of the rich biodiversity in the Balkans and the awareness how endangered it is; (2) reporting about projects and policies, illegal actions that endanger nature – a task mostly for investigative journalists; (3) give citizens, initiatives and technical experts from all levels a voice in issues of nature conservation and challenges to it, also on the local level; (4) present also positive examples and solutions; (5) use up to date communication techniques and means of visualization. Big and influential international media such as Deutsche Welle might lend their support in some of these aspects.

And a final and general conclusion: Despite all problems, it is crucial to not bury the head in the sand and to not lose hope; the participants believe in change through positive examples and are willing to contribute.