

Report of the International Workshop

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



Participants of the Workshop at Biohof Lex (Emling).

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Introduction

The issue of biodiversity, and the challenges and consequences of its dramatic loss, has recently received enhanced attention globally. In mid-October 2021, the signatories of the Convention on Biological Diversity in their bi-annual World Conference discussed ways how to curb the exodus of threatened animal and plant species. In a recent common Report, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) have outlined the close connections between biodiversity protection and climate change protection.

The Western Balkan Countries, for historical and geographical reasons, own a high degree of biodiversity, unique in Europe. Yet, probably more than elsewhere, this biodiversity is under threat, as ongoing projects in building infrastructure, energy production, use of forest and water resources, intensive agriculture, mining, tourist development, and so on, in combination with weak governance, high corruption, and extensive impunity, often collide with the aim of nature conservation and the protection of biodiversity. The IPCC states that the Mediterranean region will be particularly affected by climate change and is defined as a primary "hot spot" with possible devastating effects on biodiversity.

All six Western Balkan States want 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 has 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, 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.

Against this backdrop, the German Southeast Europe Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft) and EuroNatur organized a workshop on the topic: **"Biodiversity and the Protection of Nature in the Western Balkans. Civil Society, (Local) Politics, International Actors and the Media in Dialogue"** on 24 and 25, March 2022, at the Mercure Hotel München Freising Airport, at **Freising**, located close to Munich.

The workshop was part of an ongoing project under the same topic and is supported by the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe via the German Federal Foreign Office. Our project aims at strengthening a constructive cross-societal and cross-border dialogue on issues of nature conservation in the Western Balkans, on their substance, political relevance, conflicts of interest and their solution. The long-term aim is to enhance awareness for the issues of protecting nature and environment within the political discourse in the Western Balkan countries and to contribute to sustainable solutions. We aim at formulating suggestions and demands to be addressed to local and international actors.

The workshop gathered experts from civil society, academic experts, local government, line ministries, relevant international organizations, the European Commission, UNEP, and representatives from the media, from the Western Balkans region and Western Europe.

The most important findings of the Workshop are summarized below with some main conclusions proposed at the end.

The state and potentials of Biodiversity and Nature Conservation in the Western Balkans

As stated in the Outline of the Workshop, the Western Balkan Countries, with four so-called biogeographical regions, possess a high degree of biodiversity, unique in Europe. 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.

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 being considered as a 'museum of living fossils'. Vjosa River in Southern Albania is often called 'Europe's last wild river' and a part of the 'Blue Heart of Europe', as Balkan wild flowing rivers were labeled by the impressive film documentary from Patagonia, manufacturer of outdoor equipment. Very recently, with the establishment of the Sharr Mountains National Park in Northern Macedonia, the biggest National Park area in Europe has been established 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, tourist development a.s.o. They often collide with the interests of nature conservation and the protection of biodiversity. Moreover, climate change heavily affects this region, with possible devastating effects on biodiversity.

According to hydro-morphological assessments of rivers in the Balkans, these possess great ecological values which are all threatened by rapid hydropower development. A map shows 1.480 HPPs 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 to EU and other international rules in environmental protection. There is also a low public awareness for the necessity of nature conservation: citizens rather see air and water pollution as a priority – as they directly and visibly threaten their health.

Therefore, nature conservation is often seen as a costly alternative to development – there is a 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 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 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 equally threatening the survival of mankind as global warming. After all, marine and terrestrial ecosystems sequester 60% of global annual anthropogenic carbon emission.

Tackling with CC, we must rely on functioning habitats. Both processes have similar drivers (direct and indirect) and consequences. Therefore, concerted, and quick action is needed. Policy interventions are often shortsighted, mitigation measures can be detrimental to natural ecosystems (e.g., Hydro Power Plants - HPP, biofuel plantations), or conservation efforts might be suboptimal for climate change mitigation and often miss cross-sectoral interaction and policy integration. On the contrary, climate change mitigation policy can support biodiversity conservation, by considering systemic interaction and uncertainties and searching for options to integrate biodiversity in mitigation measures.

Biodiversity policy potentially supports CC mitigation and adaptation, e.g., by avoiding degradation of ecosystems and implementing nature-based solutions, also in urban areas.

Regarding decarbonization, to phase out fossil fuels, first to reduce energy consumption, to terminate coal-fired plants, enhance energy efficiency and the energy transition towards renewable sources are urgent priorities. Yet, the development of renewable energy sources is in potential conflict with nature conservation – see the detrimental effects in particular of small HPP development as will be shown later. This fact is a strong argument to enhance the cooperation between WB CSOs active in nature conservation with those activists fighting air pollution and other hazards to environment.

There are also strong interlinkages between biodiversity, agriculture, and forestry. Sustainable farming and forestry practices are crucial. Good examples were mentioned during the discussion. Farm to Fork, Biodiversity, Forestry Strategy are important elements of contemporary EU policies. Moving away from the separation of development and economic activities on the one hand and biodiversity conservation and CC mitigation and adaptation on the other is crucial. New approaches must be sustainable and economically profitable. All steps should be integrated with the EU accession process. Accordingly, biodiversity conservation is interpreted as 'sustainable use' rather than or in addition to 'protection'.

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 (to be followed by political action); and third, the preservation of biodiversity must be mainstreamed in other policies.

Nature Conservation and Sustainable Use

A case study from Vojvodina Province in Serbia '*Bosut Forest Area - integrating ecosystem services in the protected area designation & management*' quite impressively showed that traditional land use and integrated management can positively contribute to sustainable development. Bosut Forest Area is of great ecologic and social importance and has a high potential for generation of local income. Following extensive studies (the project got support from GIZ Open Regional Fund for Biodiversity), several ecosystem services (ES) 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, public consultations organized, elaborating links between sectors showing both, positive and negative interactions (tradeoffs and synergies). Most protected species are found in areas with traditional management. Communication with all stakeholders and work with the media was 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 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 2030. "The documents are rather clear, but the forest industry doesn't like it" according to one participant.

According to others, the question of forest use should avoid the narrative of allowing either 0 or 100% of intervention. There is also a strategic problem with non-intervention: until now, we were able to achieve a maximum of 3% of non-intervention in whole Europe and now there is the goal to achieve 10% by 2030. Although this goal is of great importance for nature conservation, experts from the WB fear that this is not possible to achieve in such a short term. 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 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. "We have to rethink the whole system, otherwise questions to protect or not protect don't make any sense", as one participant stated.

The Role of the EU

As all countries in the region are committed to become members of the EU, EU regulations, namely Chapter 27, the so-called "environmental acquis" is a crucial orientation for the politics of nature conversation.

The *European Green Deal* (GD) with the *European Biodiversity Strategy for 2030* provide guidelines in this direction. In October 2021, the European Council has 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. Discussion on the GA will be presented in the next chapter.

Experts and activists are investing great hopes into the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, setting ambitious goals, amongst others the protection of old growth forests, restoration of ecosystems, etc. It was mentioned that the funding for the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 is not yet decided.

The question was discussed with what tools the EU should support WB countries in the protection of nature and enhancing energy efficiency. The EU accession tool is not perfect, but the best one available, "let's build on this what we have already achieved and make it better", as one participant said. EU Delegations in the region and the European Commission show a commitment to push the GD, but now with the war in Ukraine the situation has become even more difficult.

There was great concern as to the potential impact of the war in Ukraine: is the war going to halt the GD and GA? Will biodiversity and climate change (CC) be moved again into the background? Will energy dependency from Russia, on the contrary, accelerate the substitution of fossil fuels and the improvement of energy efficiency? There are no answers yet, but different and worrying signals: to stop the EU Emission Trading System (ETS) and the new Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), to allow coal burning again, to increase the use of nuclear power, etc. – indeed a confusing and concerning situation. Potential changes also relate to measures of EU Agricultural Policies, concerning the Farm to Fork Strategy and the use of pesticides, and others.

There was also a warning to the governments of the region, not to put the whole blame on President Putin and the war. As one participant said: "The EU will not save the nature in the WB, it lies in the hand of

the countries". Recent experiences from Serbia where the state completely failed in halting lithium mining projects of Rio Tinto Company (despite of Socio-Economic Assessment (SEA) and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)), were a negative experience in this respect. It was only people's protests that could halt the project.

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

There was an intensive discussion on The *Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GA)*, adopted by the European Commission as part of the [Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans](#) and specifically on the **Green Agenda Action Plan**.

There were quite numerous questions and criticism as to the Action Plan (AP):

- AP contains 58 measures, a lot of strategies, documents, reports, not going beyond accession obligations. It is a mixture of measures (adoption of legislation, implementation, etc.), in some cases too ambitious. The 58 measures are not really synchronized or bound to certain benchmarks in the accession process.
- Much is missing, like fundamental issues in terms of biodiversity, the adoption of the Habitats and the Birds Directives as well as other issues.
- There are different bodies responsible for special activities, altogether making the process complicated.
- Not much is known about the GA AP on the CSOs level with CSOs not having been involved properly in the preparations.
- The lack of enforcement of this process: many activities are measured by continuous progress until 2030 and are not broken down to manageable measures.
- With the Economic and Investment Plan, launched at the same time as the GA, things are moving ahead – in February 2022 several infrastructure projects have been approved. Not so for the AP. The two documents are not really aligned as they were supposed to be. As one participant said: "We have an Economic and Investment Plan for grey infrastructure and we have the GA AP for soft measures – unfortunately, there is no money behind the latter". Even the funding for the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 is not yet decided.
- There were serious doubts about the role / performance of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) who was designated to monitor the whole process but – according to observers - has so far not been visible or active enough. "Whereas RCC is not the body to lead the accession process, the European Commission is staying a bit aside";
- 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.
- 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 – here the EC should give clear guidance. E.g., several road constructions are in the pipeline, but no urban / public transport proposal is on the list.
- IPA funds cannot easily replace potential financing from the GA, as IPA programming is considered a long and complex process.
- As concerns International Financial Institutions (IFIS) as well as USAID, they have partly changed their portfolio and seem ready to invest more in biodiversity projects. Again, the question of fundable projects arises here.
- There was mentioning of German funds regarding nature, such as the Prespa / Ohrid Nature Trust. With some self-criticism CSO activists observed that "there is money available but spent wrongly.... - we need to have feasibility studies and nature-based project proposals on the table; yet, we don't have 'ready plans'."

The Role of Civil Society Organizations / the Public

The civil sector is certainly key to successful nature conservation. The case of lithium mining (by Rio Tinto Company) in Serbia provides a strong example here, where it could be observed 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 should be lessons drawn from 'Rio Tinto': 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 also technical experts within the government bodies 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 became more informed and aware, starting mostly with the issue of small hydropower plants (HPP) across the region, leading to an ‘avalanche’ of public pressure on governments. Public protests function as ‘game changer’: people go to the street, they don’t want to have air pollution, or new HPP, and pressure governments for policy changes.

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 our discussion. BioNet Network, a regional initiative and platform, was established in 2016 and supported by the German GIZ. Since 2021, when GIZ funding has phased out, BioNet is struggling to keep alive and 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 further discussed. There are no funds for developing proposals, especially when it comes to regional cooperation; most donors are funding national projects including some transboundary issues.

The focus of our 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 were coming from all levels (government, National Park administration, academic institutions, local administration, members of 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 (EuroNatur, UNEP, GIZ, WWF, and others) fought for Shari Mountains, both on national and transboundary level, to become the biggest transboundary protected area in Europe with around 2.400 km² together with Sharri NP in Kosovo, Mavrovo NP (also in North Macedonia) and Korab-Koritnik Nature Park in Albania. UNEP was monitoring the process in North Macedonia, by building a consortium, designing a socio-economic study, stakeholder consultations, negotiations, revision of the zoning, a.s.o.; 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 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 building of 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 seems key. As an example, the directorate of Sharri National Park in Kosovo is severely understaffed, trying to fight illegal logging, hunting, construction activities, fire making, instead of wildlife monitoring and cooperation with NGOs. In general, management of PAs needs support through qualified staff, training, a sound budget, and monitoring – not least to prevent PA staff from being involved themselves in illegal activities.

Model projects like ‘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 closely cooperate by following a multiple development approach. Activities include:

- biodiversity studies, socio-economic assessments,
- contributing to regional development by working with / mobilizing local people and stakeholders, establishing of local action groups; working with a bottom-up approach and “trying to make local people proud in management of ‘their’ protected area”;
- aiming at an improvement and diversification of income sources, agri-rural development, cherish traditional forms of land management (traditional farming, shepherding, etc.); examples include plant processing, beekeeping, promotion of nature friendly tourism.

- forest management, climate change and natural resource management, renewable energy,
- reducing the threats to biodiversity, improvement of habitats, efforts in harmonizing monitoring practices, e.g., joint (transboundary) camera trapping project.
- awareness raising, promotion of natural values, education, and capacity building.

Despite the positive developments, the PA is facing many threats; HP development is a big issue. The attention was drawn to the planned Skavica HPP on the Drin River, a 250-400 MW installation. If it is built, 35 villages will be flooded. It is also problematic on the transboundary level as the connectivity of the mountains would be threatened.

The question was raised if there exist any (regional / transborder) cooperation between all actors working in the Sharri mountains. Yes, but it is at the very beginning due to low capacity - instruments and specific projects are needed.

Nature Conservation in the Countries of WB 6: Success Stories and Challenges for Protected Areas

There were short reports given by representatives of CSOs on the situation of nature conservation in individual countries of the WB 6, analyzing relevant actors, conflicts of interest, 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 HP, is the most pressing single issue in the region.

Albania

NC is under extreme pressure in Albania as the topic of one speaker was suggesting: *'Protected areas revision in Albania: placing infrastructure and displacing nature'*. Although PA surface has nominally increased over time, the process was hasty, scientific arguments were scarce and not adequate and "the driver for changes was not nature and ecology but infrastructure development". Examples: the Albanian Alps, the National Park "Divjake - Karavasta" and the National Park Butrint - all areas were protected not for ecological reasons but for rural and urban development. Most striking is the case of the planned Vloora International Airport (in the delta area of Vjosa River, see below) and related infrastructure, like a marina and hotel resorts. These projects are supported by the highest political level, reportedly with dubious financing, and imply a clear infringement of Albanian and international law (e.g., EMERALD site, important bird area, potential Nature 2000 site). Infrastructure development inside National Parks (factories, hydropower, racing with motorcycles, etc.) are additional challenges. Whereas protected areas in Albania nominally increased, there are no more strict reserves; wetlands and coastal areas are reduced by 15%, some PAs were completely removed from the map without any ecological explanation. Careful planning of PAs with proper spatial planning is important, and later changes in the protection regimes ("not protected holes like in a cheese") should not be an option.

Concerning HPP construction, Albania is the champion in the region. Reportedly, at present many hydropower lakes in Albania are empty, many HPPs are therefore not working, providing more evidence that HP is not a sustainable energy source.

Most disputed is Vjosa River, often labeled as 'Europe's last wild river', with several new species discovered. There alone, 40 HPP were planned. Protests against the destruction of Vjosa are substantial, supported by national and international experts, many scientists involved. Activities of CSOs and their fight for a status as a National Park received supportive statements from the European Parliament and Commission. 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. Only recently, 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 whole Albanian part of the river a national (river) park.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, only 3% of the country are under protection. Although having abundant nature resources, rich biodiversity, high endemics, the awareness on environment in BiH reportedly is extremely low. Nature is not respected by the governmental level. Often the legal framework is not

applied, there is no transparency, people are not involved in planning processes, e.g., EIA. All 244 rivers are endangered by construction, more than 500 HPP are still planned with devastating impact on the environment.

A case was presented of a Belgium investor who built a small HPP and plans two more: there was obvious corruption during issuing permits, no transparency, no information, no EIA, changes of plans during construction of pipelines, turbines, and access roads. According to the Ministry in charge there was no need for a new permit. In 2020, the Aarhus Centre, an NGO providing legal assistance to citizens, submitted lawsuits against the investor. But constructions were going on; recently, adjacent communities didn't have water for eight hours per day; now the case is at the Supreme Court and the construction is currently stopped.

In BiH more and more citizens are fighting for their environment, mostly against HPP, for example 'the Women of Kruščica'. The "fight for rivers" is one of the most inspirational stories –people who protest, face repressions nevertheless go to the street. There is a 'Coalition for the Protection of Rivers' (about 30 organizations) on state level, including Republika Srpska – therefore 'the river movement is uniting the entities in BiH! Environmental activists in BiH finally, in early July 2022, gained a major success, 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. In the Former Yugoslavia, big accumulation lakes were established. Recently, the numbers of small HPP increase rapidly, with currently 77 locations in Kosovo; The goal of the government is 25% renewable energy by 2025 (until now coal / lignite is used). The government considers HP as 'green energy', providing them with subsidies. HPP projects are therefore profitable for investors. But HP is only providing a low percentage of the energy demand. For small HPP a maximum of 70% of water extraction is allowed by law, but often up to 100% is taken.

As reports from CSOs suggest, companies from EU countries are investing in small HPP constructions with considerable profits (in some cases pressure from diplomats to issue permits was reported). The case study of Austrian company KelKos in Lumbardhi River near Dečan is exemplary: Procedures here were far from transparent and reality differing from official reports. In another project by Matkos Group in Brezovica / Stërpcë / Lepenc / Durla five HPP were built and lead to heavy damages of the landscape (also by extensive road constructions) and the water regime. HPP is also heavily affecting access to water for locals –more generally livelihood and quality of life. Construction took place under protests, instead of a moratorium on HPP announced by the new government in Prishtina activists were threatened by the investors.

Kosovo sees a growing awareness and civil society is raising its voice, activists are getting international support, and there is the hope that such cases cannot happen again.

The *Protected Area Bjeshkët e Nemuna*, proclaimed a National Park in 2013, is under serious threat. Besides building of HPP, challenges are illegal logging, poaching, deliberately setting fires (as then the damaged wood is allowed to be taken). An approved spatial and management plan was lacking, as well as administrative capacity. In 2019, a Memorandum of Understanding was developed, and a new prosecutor helped fighting illegal logging; in 2021, high numbers of sequestrations were reported. Some solutions as reported referred to: (1) continued collaboration with the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC) – enforcement of laws inside PAs, empowering and supporting prosecutors, (2) submitting a new proposal for the spatial plan, (3) pushing the development of a management plan, and (4) finalizing a wildlife monitoring concept and joint PA's efforts, such as Balkan Peace Park (BPP), Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme (BLRP).

It is still a question whether the present government, expressing commitment to environmental protection, will change the situation to the better.

Montenegro

Also in Montenegro, hydropower is an issue on the top of the agenda, as demonstrated by the *Komarnica* case. Currently, the energy produced in MNE comes to 55% from HP, 36% thermal power from firing of lignite in Pljevlja (210 MW), and the remaining from wind and solar. Pljevlja is planned to close in 2035 and the state energy company (EPCG) is looking for substitutes.

Small HPP development started 15 years ago. When realizing that they were losing their sources of drinking water, local communities started protests and cooperation with NGOs. Since 2019, a moratorium on construction permits has been signed by all stakeholders. Still, 32 HPP with valid contracts are being implemented.

The Komarnica canyon is one of the deepest in Europe, the river is about 25 km long, its upper part is Nevidio canyon, with each year 3 to 4 thousand tourists visiting. The river is flowing to Piva Lake, a big accumulation. Although national and international protection mechanisms are in place, such as EMERALD, potential Natura 2000 and UNESCO World Heritage sites, EPCG reportedly plans a huge dam. The installation is supposed to yield 3-4% of total national energy production. Protests and are ongoing, currently, the EIA is done and a decision from the Environmental Agency is pending.

The presentation '*Ulcinj Salt Works – Montenegro's Litmus Test for EU Chapter 27 Accession Negotiations*' looked back to the history of the "salina" as case of a 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. The European Parliament's resolution in 2016 was a turning point in this case. The strong support from) diplomats, the EU 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, 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: 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 forms the Biosphere Reserve Ohrid-Prespa since 2014, parts are EMERALD sites and Key Biodiversity Areas. Lake Ohrid is the deepest and oldest lake in Europe hosting the highest biodiversity index in the world and can be considered as "a museum of living fossils". 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 protection faces great challenges from solid waste, lake pollution through wastewater, invasive species, overfishing, poaching, fluctuating water level, tourism pressures by boat tourism, building touristic complexes in the zone of strict protection, illegal construction, and urbanization.

Nine biodiversity hotspots have been identified on Lake Ohrid. Nevertheless, plans and projects for further urbanization and development are overlapping the hotspots. Detailed studies prove that none of the existing laws, plans and decisions, including a *Draft Study for re-valorization of Lake Ohrid* and a *Draft Management Plan for Lake Ohrid*, stops the on-going destruction from urbanization and construction.

Despite impressive and professional NGO activities the situation reportedly has not changed, irrespective of changes in the government, "as the same interests as before are in place". The urban plans from the previous government remained in place, with "powerful figures behind", "it is always about corruption and personal gains".

Moreover – even when governments change, the bureaucracy behind tends to remain the same and it can block many changes.

As the lake is shared with Albania transboundary cooperation is important, both on government and NGO level.

Serbia

Illegal killing of birds was the case presented by a Serbian NGO. In one year, approximately 100.000 birds are killed or captured (illegally and via hunting quotas); another problem is the trapping of singing birds. Whereas many cases of trapping are discovered the police often doesn't act; International help is urgently needed and there should be a regional team in the WB6 working for the issue of the protection of birds.

HP in Serbia was proclaimed in 2000 as a strategic element of energy transition - even by NGOs (as a way to reach sustainability). When the first installations were built, results became obvious: damage is

extreme and gains not really visible. Already 110 HPP were built, mostly in highly sensitive areas, including PAs. A new law on nature protection doesn't allow HPP in PAs (Serbia has less than 8% of PAs, should be enlarged). The ban to build HPP unless it is proclaimed as public interest is problematic as the government proclaims the interest. By-passing of EIA is on the agenda as cumulative assessments are rarely done. State incentives make HPP very profitable, with a high return in capital, opening doors for corruption. HPP that are now being built are based on the cadaster in the 1980ies.

The NGO "Polekol/Pravo na vodu/Right to water" is informing local initiatives and helped them filing two lawsuits; the main idea is to build a united environmental front and to building capacity. Together with representatives from other countries the 'Defender of Rivers of Balkans' initiative was created, as well as the 'Women in Environment' initiative.

Biodiversity und Nature Conservation: The Role of the Media

There were journalists present from both international and local media from the region, some of the latter being specialized in environmental issues.

The following challenges and points were mentioned:

- environment is not a topic, in conventional journalism in the region., Topics preferred are crime, corruption, political events.
- How can journalists make biodiversity and nature protection an issue for their reporting, how can they address the audience, 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" reach the audience in the WB 6. People in the region are more and more informed and interested in environment, as much as it becomes a burning issue. Yet, environmental issues other than nature protection, like pollution – mostly air pollution – receive far more attention from the citizens.
- One aim should be to inspire people, to change their behavior, and to influence government decisions - both a difficult task. A constructive, solution-orientated journalism is one way to address environmental topics.
- As the issue of HPP shows: Stories in nature conservation are complex, often difficult to break down to be understood. Working with visuals is therefore important. There is the danger of "losing the message".
- Media people need time and money to get into the theme and engage in a learning process.
- Working conditions of journalists are not the best – it is hard to write good articles under time pressure and with low payment and difficulties to access information.
- On the local level there is a lot of challenges, such as lack of public information (on paper good laws exist on public information, but this doesn't work in reality – media people do not get the information required on time). An example: In Serbia today it is nearly impossible to get information from institutions: "we are struggling to get official information". Public servants are often scared to lose their job if they provide relevant information.
- Investigative journalists must question themselves where the line between journalist and activist is.
- Journalists often must fear for personal security because people who want to hide something are sometimes ready to use violence. Some examples were mentioned, e.g., the case of Rio Tinto mining, or Chinese investments; it's "a fight David against Goliath", as one participant said.
- The influence of business matters: sometimes owners of HPP are even owners of the main media.
- The importance of networking of investigative journalists as well as the solidarity among journalists has been highlighted; networking with dedicated journalist unions to protect the work of the journalists and their personal safety should be encouraged.
- Before publishing an article, a fact checking, and legal scanning must be done to be on the 'safe' side (not all journalists get this support); there is still the question of quality of the news.
- Alternative media channels should be empowered, and opportunities used as regards new technologies; 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. Topics often are air pollution, HP issues, and other environmental topics, sometimes including crime and corruption.
- There was an appeal that big international media should support small local media, as the local ones need models for new journalism, capacity building and training.
- For NGOs the cooperation with media is key.

- The engagement in environmental issues seems to be highly dependent from the type of media. Citizens channels, investigative journalists and bigger international media seem to have the greatest potential and/or motivation.

Perspectives, Options for Further Action, Further Steps

These were the main conclusions from the conference: ²

- Conference participants have great expectations regarding the benefits of 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) who was designated to monitor the GA process but – according to observers - has so far not been visible or active enough. The European Commission should ensure that the process is properly monitored in the future, including all stakeholders, like regional CSOs.
- Empowering of Civil Society Organizations is key. Initiatives are already there, and challenges are, more or less, the same in the whole region. Regional cooperation is a must, and new mechanisms for regional cooperation should be considered. 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.
- Recent discussions on EU level on energy and food security regarding the Ukraine war raise concerns of serious setbacks regarding biodiversity. But, instead of all conflicts and problems, despite the war in Ukraine and its impacts, there is no more time to lose.
- Climate change and biodiversity are deeply interlinked, 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, e.g., nature-based solutions are necessary.
- A new approach to nature protection is needed – nature conservation should be regarded as an investment in the future and not as mere costs – this is a main message to decision makers.
- There are two paths of nature conservation and protection: on one hand, the protection approach, focusing on the protection of natural processes, on the other the move to a sustainable use of natural resources; and in this respect, sustainable, including traditional land use has a high potential for conserving nature and biodiversity.
- 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.
- Challenges to nature conservation within the countries of the Western Balkans are manifold, including the usage of hydropower, building / tourist infrastructure in coastal and mountainous areas, traffic infrastructure (roads and airports), illegal logging and poaching, waste, wastewater, and sewage.
- The unsustainable use of hydropower seems to be a systemic problem in all WB countries, it's described as coming like a pandemic wave over the region and there is a pattern behind; a lack of transparency and corruption are issues here. What is encouraging is the growing movement of civil society protests, like, for example “Save the Blue Heart of Europe”, the announced protection of Vjosa River in Albania as a National Park and the banning of new HP projects like in BiH, both decided well after our event, give reason for some optimism.
- Protected area management is a fundamental problem in all countries; in general, a weak management is notorious, leading to the assumption that sometimes this situation prevails on purpose.
- Counteracting illegal activities as regards natural resources use, be it killing of birds, poaching, timber extraction, illegal buildings, etc. needs a 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.

² Mainly based on the contributions of our panel chairs and compiled and presented during the event by Ms. Sissi Samec.

- As has been demonstrated with the example of the Sharr/Sharri National Park, cooperation between national and local authorities, protected areas management, local citizens and CSOs, and international donors is key to a successful nature protection.
- As concerns communication, nature conservation / protection activities should be a message conveyed to people on the highest possible level; governments are not 'monolithic' and technical experts can be allies of civil society; furthermore, we 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 like '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 showed. There, 'the river movement' is also transcending boundaries of entities.
- Media can and must play an important role for 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, 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.
- To fulfill this role, journalists need access to information, training (as nature conservation is a highly complex issue), resources in terms of time, payment and technical equipment, protection from physical and legal harassment. Big and influential international media like Deutsche Welle might lend their support in some of these aspects.
- And a final and general conclusion: Despite all problems, not 'sticking the head in the sand' and not losing optimism is important; participants believe in a change through positive examples, willing to contribute.

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