



Civil Society Forum

of the Western Balkans Summit Series



“Green Agenda - Biodiversity and Nature Conservation”

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GESELLSCHAFT

Civil Society & Think Tank Forum I

Road to Berlin

June 01-02, 2021



Western
Balkans
Summit
Berlin
2021

Supported by:



Federal Foreign Office

Introduction

This paper is serving as a basis for discussion on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, with special emphasis on biodiversity and nature conservation. It provides an overview of the Berlin Process, a review of biodiversity across the Western Balkans, obligations governments have pledged to fulfill, and the role civil society organisations (CSOs) can have in this process.

The outcomes of the discussions from the Working Group “Biodiversity and Nature Conservation,” which consisted of the representatives from civil society and think tanks from the Western Balkans, will form a policy recommendation to be presented to decision makers, mostly but not exclusively in the second event where politicians and officials from government, EU, and relevant international institutions will meet.

Nature conservation as a sub-sectoral environmental policy is not the high priority of any Western Balkan government, either as an EU candidate or potential candidate country. However, ongoing processes and occasions, such as the Berlin Summit, create a unique window of hope for the region, its people, and natural environment.

The Sofia Declaration and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans are prerequisites for the future steps taken by the EU and each of the Western Balkan governments. When fulfilled, they would enable the Western Balkans and the EU to create stronger links between the climate and their environmental actions, policy reforms, and EU approximation. They would alleviate the Western Balkan governments in the process of EU acquis harmonization, especially regarding Chapter 27 on Environment and Climate Change, which is one of the most challenging.

Questions for the Working Group:

1. How can the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans be operationalized to address biodiversity and nature conservation?
2. Which activities have you already conducted or are planning to conduct with regards to the Green Agenda?

Status of the biodiversity and protected areas globally and in the EU

Globally, biodiversity is facing major threats and the European Union (EU) is not an exception. In the EU, as much as 81% of habitats are in poor condition, with peatlands, grasslands, and dune habitats deteriorating the most. “We urgently need to deliver on the commitments in the new EU Biodiversity Strategy to reverse this decline for the benefit of nature, people, climate, and the economy” said Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans, and Fisheries Virginijus Sinkevičius¹.

In 2019, international scientific body IPBES brought to the forefront the urgent need for “transformative change”² to prevent biodiversity collapse, which would be disastrous for people and planet. There are several main reasons for the decline of biological diversity, which are: the overexploitation of natural resources, climate change, unsustainable production and consumption, degradation and fragmentation of natural environments, change in land use, introduction of new types of agriculture, excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides, increased pollution, and natural disasters such as floods and droughts.

Status of the biodiversity and protected areas in Western Balkans

Although each country is unique, the Western Balkan countries have a very similar set of advantages and challenges. The countries share political, social, and cultural challenges, and are all following the same trend of quick and unsustainable development transitions. As a result, they are devastating the biodiversity of

¹ <https://www.eea.europa.eu/highlights/latest-evaluation-shows-europes-nature>

² https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/inline/files/ipbes_global_assessment_report_summary_for_policymakers.pdf

their country in the process and the potential for a more sustainable, wealthier development for their people.

The entire Balkan Peninsula is a biodiversity hot spot with a characteristic climate, landscapes, and habitats, many of European interest. The region also has a large percentage of forest cover, many free-flowing rivers, and three biogeographic regions: Continental, Alpine, and Mediterranean, creating the conditions for the vast number of habitats. Flora diversity is very present, with a high rate of endemism (10-20% of all the plants are endemic to the region). The karst ecosystem is the largest in Europe, and contains a significant underground freshwater reservoir with the most extended network of subterranean rivers and lakes in Europe, as well as wetlands of international importance.

The Balkan Peninsula hosts more than 120 species of mammals, which is the highest index of diversity in Europe, and more than 500 bird species, though many of them are threatened and represented by small populations. It also hosts 33 species of amphibians and 71 species of reptiles, of which 28% and 21%, respectively are endemic. 288 species of butterflies can also be found in the peninsula. Additionally, the Balkan Peninsula has extremely rich underground and cave fauna. More than 1,000 terrestrial species and nearly 700 aquatic underground species have been recorded.

Western Balkans countries (WB6) share similar habitat types and even the same populations of some species like large carnivores, but they also share the same threats to biodiversity and its wise-use management. The most vivid obstacles to nature conservation are air and water pollution from industry and energy sectors, soil and water contamination from intensive agricultural and urbanism practices, deforestation, poaching, poisoning, and in the general, the loss of habitats and species.

The main actors to blame for this situation are passive and highly corrupt governments, run by private rather than public interests. The so

called “dam tsunami” with 2,796 hydropower plants planned across the region³ is already causing an incalculable damage to nature, local communities, and the economy. A common feature to all threats is large international investment supported by governments across the WB6 without transparency and public access to information of interest, such as contracts. Such investments typically involve no public consultation process and no comprehensive and non-biased Environmental and Social Impact Assessments, which are obligatory by national and international legal frameworks.

According to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and its Aichi targets at least 17% of terrestrial and inland water and 10% of coastal and marine areas were supposed to be protected by 2020. The European Commission has formally adopted the 30×30 target (to protect 30 % of its territory by 2030) in the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030⁴, and has additionally pledged that one third of the protected areas should be “strictly protected.” Percentages of the protected areas in the Western Balkan are hardly approaching the 20 % mark and some countries have less than 5 % of their territory under protection, as is the case with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

³ <https://balkanrivers.net/en/campaign>

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/actions-being-taken-eu/eu-biodiversity-strategy-2030_en

Country	Percentage of the protected areas
Albania	18.59 %
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3,63%
Kosovo*	11,5%
Montenegro	14%
North Macedonia	8,96%
Serbia	7,74%

Biodiversity policy challenges by country (according to the countries' progress reports⁵)

Annual Progress reports done by the European Commission provide a comprehensive overview of the current national legal framework, attitudes, and capacity constraints in each country. Included below are some country-specific segments. A majority of the other elements included in the Progress reports are analogous to all Western Balkan countries.

Albania

The legislation on strategic investment raises concerns for the protection of biodiversity, as it may allow **large tourism and industrial investments in protected areas, e.g. the proposed airport in the Vjosa-Narta area**. Albania should ensure **enforcement of the deforestation and logging laws**, and prosecute offenders and arsonists.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The planning for and investments in renewable energy, including **hydro, wind, and solar power plants, requires compliance with the EU's environmental legislation**, including SEA, EIA, and the Birds and Habitats Directives.

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/albania_report_2020.pdf
https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/bosnia_and_herzegovina_report_2020.pdf
https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/montenegro_report_2020.pdf

Montenegro

A **military training area was established on the Sinjajevina mountain**, which is part of the UNESCO Tara River biosphere reserve. Its operation should be planned and monitored in line with the UNESCO principles of socio-cultural and ecological sustainability.

North Macedonia

Some steps were taken to implement the UNESCO conclusions on the natural and cultural heritage of the **Ohrid** region. However, considerable efforts are still needed, notably to prevent it from being included on the "danger list" for world heritage.

Serbia

Serbia has still not addressed gaps in transposition, **allowing the hunting of non-huntable birds**, especially the **goshawk** and the **turtle dove**. Serbia needs to fully incorporate EU standards on **prohibited means of capturing and killing wild animals** throughout its entire legislation, including in legislation on hunting.

Questions for the Working Group:

1. How can the Green Agenda for the Western Balkan be implemented for the sake of biodiversity and nature conservation in the region?
2. Which concrete policy changes would you prioritize apart from those that are highlighted in the Progress reports?

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/north_macedonia_report_2020.pdf
https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/serbia_report_2020.pdf

The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and the Berlin Process

The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans is a **new growth strategy for the region**, leaping from a traditional economic model to a more **sustainable economy**, in line with the European Green Deal. It is embedded in the Economic and Investment Plan, which has “a truly transformative potential and aims to spur the long-term recovery of the Western Balkans and their economic convergence with the EU.”

One of the five main areas (apart from climate action, circular economy, fighting pollution of air, water and soil, and sustainable food systems and rural areas) is **biodiversity**: the protection and restoration of ecosystems, where it is stated that “the Western Balkans have a **wealth of habitats and species** which need to be protected for future generations” and that “the EU will support the region in developing and implementing a Western Balkans 2030 Biodiversity Action Plan and a Forest Landscape Restoration Plan. Options for a Western Balkans Biodiversity Information Hub will be explored.”

The Berlin Process started in 2014 with an aim at stepping up regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and aiding the integration of these countries into the European Union. The Process’s connectivity agenda refers to linking the people (social dimension), economies (economic dimension), and states (political dimension) of the region. Within this agenda, the Process has thus far yielded initiatives and projects in the fields of transport and infrastructure, economic connectivity, youth cooperation, and cooperation among businesses and civil societies in the Western Balkans. It also inspired intergovernmental cooperation through entities set up during its course: the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), the Western Balkans Chambers Investment Forum (WBCIF), and the Western Balkans Fund (WBF). In addition to meetings with high-ranking governmental officials (**Western Balkan Summit Series**), the Berlin Process involves meetings with the representatives of regional civil society organizations (Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkan Summit

Series), youth organizations (Youth Forum), and business associations (Business Forum).

The involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Berlin Process so far has been transparent and inclusive. However, the capacities of many CSOs from Western Balkan are rather limited in following this level of negotiations and processes. Due to the pandemic and online versions of the meeting, we have a greater opportunity to bring many CSOs voices into the process. Results of the discussion and following policy recommendation from the “Civil Society & Think Tank Forum I: Berlin 2021” will be communicated and advocated on the “Civil Society & Think Tank Forum II: Berlin 2021,” which will align with the Berlin Process Summit.

Civil Society Forum is a platform through which the Western Balkans civil society provides input in the Berlin Process, by the elaboration of regionally relevant issues and policies, and by the monitoring of progress in the realization of the Process goals and initiatives. The yearly and interim meetings and workshops, and an online consultation interface, provide opportunities for vast consultative processes and for expert-guided formulation of policy recommendations to decision-makers in the region. The Civil Society Forum is this year coordinated by the Aspen Institute and Southeast Europe Association.

Discussion points from the Think Tank Forum and Civil Society Forum of the 2019 Poznan Summit on the environment included:

- investments in new **coal projects should urgently be stopped**, having in mind the Paris agreement, global goals and trends, and regional EU requirements that by 2020, at least 20% of all energy produced in EU aspiring states must come from renewable sources.
- Investments in **mini hydro-plants are endangering rivers** and biodiversity across the Western Balkans region and their further building must be stopped immediately.

An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans - Apart from other sectors, attention to biodiversity remains very general: The **protection of biodiversity and restoration of the natural capital**, as well as efficient waste collection systems and preventing environmental pollution, should also be addressed. This could maximize the huge **tourism potential** of the region's natural environment, catering both to local and broader European markets and the increasing demand for sustainable tourism.

Biodiversity in the Sofia Declaration - In the declaration adopted in Sofia, Bulgaria in November 2020, Western Balkan countries committed to defining a **post-2020 biodiversity framework** and developing a long-term strategy for halting biodiversity loss, protection, and restoration of ecosystems and abundant biological diversity⁶.

The following actions were agreed upon:

- Develop and implement a **Western Balkans 2030 Biodiversity Strategic Plan**, including the means for joint implementation, monitoring, and reporting;
- Prepare **nature protection and restoration plans** including for marine areas;
- Develop and implement a **Western Balkans Forest Landscape Restoration Plan**;
- Analyse biodiversity benefits of **Nature-based Solutions** and opportunities for their integration into the development of climate and other plans;
- Strengthen the mechanisms for **regional cooperation and strategic planning** on biodiversity conservation and implementation of the commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity, such as the SEE Biodiversity Task Force. Reinforce the engagement with the United Nations Rio Conventions and join efforts in preparing a regional position on a global post-2020

biodiversity agenda in line with EU strategic goals;

- Improve **knowledge exchange**, including collection, management, and availability of information on biodiversity and nature conservation, enhance partnership among the WB6 and EU research centres and existing platforms, and explore options to set up the Western Balkans Biodiversity Information Hub.

Questions for the Working Group:

1. What is the status of the implementation of the Sofia declaration in your country?
2. Do you know who is in charge for its implementation?
3. How do you see the role of your CSO in this process, for topics you have a capacity and an interest to be involved in?
4. What concrete proposals can we make?
5. What do you know about the Nature-based Solutions as a concept and do you support it?
6. Do you have a victorious restoration example from your country that would be beneficial to share in the region?

Advocated demands by national CSOs towards the governments

Albania

- In February 2021, 20 Albanian environmental organisations under the direction of EcoAlbania initiated the establishment of Vjosa National Park - Europe's 1st Wild River National Park⁷,
- Although a hunting moratorium is still in force in Albania (ending 2021), it is necessary to develop new legislation to ensure that the practice of hunting complies with the principles of wise use and ecologically balanced control of the species,
- There are only two sites on the proposed list covering the marine area, although Albania has a significant coastline and important marine

⁶ <https://www.rcc.int/docs/546/sofia-declaration-on-the-green-agenda-for-the-western-balkans-rn>

⁷⁷ <https://balkanrivers.net/en/news/vjosa-environmental-groups-submit-proposal-for-europes-first-wild-river-national-park>

biodiversity values. None of the proposed sites is designated yet as a Natura 2000 site,

- The requirements of the seal skins Directive and Regulation are not transposed at all into national legislation. Since no specific legislation is in place there is no competent authority defined for implementing the requirements, including verification, control, and record keeping.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

- Initiative for the ban on the small hydropower plant's construction in both entities (Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska),

- Initiated designation of new protected areas (rivers Orlja, Cvrcka, Upper Neretva, the confluence of Drina and Sava rivers, and Crvene stijene),

- Analysis and advocacy activities for the ratification of the Nagoya Protocol (protocol with UN Convention on Biological Diversity),

- Activities to establish the Emerald network need to be initiated,

- Request to pass a regulation laying down criteria for the identification of the endangered, rare, and sensitive habitats and habitat types of special importance for conservation in Federation BiH.

Montenegro

- Need for more marine protected areas (the only one designated was the nature park Platamuni in April 2021),

- Accelerate work on the preparation and adoption of management plans for protected areas proclaimed in the last five years. Significantly improve the capacity of protected areas' managers for dealing with all the aspects of environmental management. Undertake systematic and coordinated work on the establishment of the NATURA 2000 network,

- Suspend any further illegal and unprofessional flow of water bodies. Bring plans for the conservation of wetland habitats taking into account the threats they are exposed to (Skadar Lake, Tivat Salina and Ulcinj Salina), and considering their importance in ecological

interactions, as well as the influence on conservation of many native species,

- Establishing forest reserves to preserve untouched habitats before establishing the Natura 2000 network.

North Macedonia

- Advocacy and awareness raising activities for the proclamation of Shar Mountain National Park,

- Developed the manual for monitoring the key species of flora and fauna and types of habitats,

- Campaign against hydropower projects in the national park "Mavrovo,"

- Development and further activities for the adoption of National Anti-Poisoning Road Maps.

Serbia

- Amend the Rulebook on the declaration and protection of strictly protected wild species of plants, animals, and fungi, and the Rulebook on declaring a closed hunting season for protected wild game species, in order to fully transpose the provisions of the Habitats Directive and the Birds Directive,

- Adopt the Regulation on Appropriate Assessment and the corresponding amendments to the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment and the Law on Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment, in order to establish the required standards for the approval of plans and projects that could impact the ecological network, in accordance with Article 6, paragraph 3, of the Habitats Directive.

Common regional policy recommendations for the governments

- Moratorium on small hydropower plants across the Western Balkans;
- Increase the percentage of the PAs by 30%, in accordance with the new post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework and EU Biodiversity Strategy;
- Better management of the existing protected areas;
- Full harmonization of the Habitat Directive and Bird Directives into national legislation;
- Improvement of CSO participation in the preparation, adoption, and monitoring of the implementation of regulations, in particular through their inclusion in the early stages of development;
- Development of the management plans for large carnivores;
- Mainstreaming of biodiversity (improving the cooperation between the nature protection, energy, agriculture, water management, forestry, spatial and urban planning, and the construction sector).

Role of EU and international actors in the process

- Seek faster and adequate implementation with defined milestones for monitoring;
- Make sure further investments in the Western Balkans will boost the biodiversity and nature conservation, not threaten them. (In addition to the EU's significant grant funding to the region, the EU could provide guarantees to help reduce the cost of financing for both public and private investments, and to reduce the risk for investors. Financial support through the proposed Western Balkans Guarantee Facility is expected to mobilize approximately EUR 20 billion of investments in the next decade.);
- In 2021, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) together with the partners from the region, will start working on an Action Plan and roadmaps for the implementation of the Green Agenda, together with establishing of the appropriate monitoring system.

Role of CSOs in the process

- A majority of the environmental CSOs from Western Balkan countries are dedicated to local issues and do not understand or are not following those broader processes. Therefore, they do not clearly see their role in them. Having in mind the very limited capacities of the sectoral institutions, collected inputs and dedication from small, local CSOs could be vital in raising awareness and bringing about needed change in Western Balkan countries. They should be encouraged and led by stronger national and regional organizations and networks;
- A unified voice and common recommendations are often not easily achieved; however, they are helpful and are increasing the possibility to be accepted;
- CSOs can significantly contribute to the research activities on the protection, management, and use of species and habitats in the national territory;
- Serve in a watch-dog role as in all other policy-making and negotiations processes.