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BioNET Position Paper

BioNET is an independent regional network of 14 highly qualified biodiversity-related Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in South-East Europe (SEE) committed to creating an enabling environment for improved nature conservation and promoting sustainable use of natural resources, in accordance with national strategies, regional priorities, the EU Birds and Habitats Directives and Biodiversity Strategy 2020, and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

“OUR LIFE INSURANCE – OUR NATURAL CAPITAL”

TOWARDS A POST-2020 EU BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY – WORKING REGIONALLY ON NEGOTIATION CHAPTER 27

The path toward EU integration demands that countries in the Western Balkans undertake a catalogue of political, social and economic reforms. The political momentum that is driving these reforms must be harnessed to in order to strengthen action aimed at achieving the accession criteria for nature protection as well as other environmental issues under Chapter 27.

EU biodiversity policy, especially the ecological network NATURA 2000 and the Birds and Habitats Directives, provide a much-needed framework for nature protection in Western Balkan countries. These policy frameworks must be implemented in the face of vested interests, including numerous hydropower plants that threaten rivers the Western Balkans, rapid development of coastal and marine areas, illegal exploitation of natural resources, including logging in protected forests, and killing of animal species.

The EU Biodiversity Strategy 2020 offers a good framework for action aimed at protecting species, habitats, ecosystems and the services they provide “outside of EU borders”.

Western Balkan countries did not participate in the development of the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2020 and therefore did not participate in developing the joint vision for nature protection on the European continent. Consequently, lacking binding obligations, national Governments in the Western Balkans have not integrated the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2020 or common issues addressed by the Strategy into National Biodiversity Strategies, Action Plans or other relevant policy documents.

The European Commission’s Annual Progress Reports on Chapter 27 Environment and Climate Change have focused on the compliance of countries in the Western Balkan with the policies and standards of the EU *acquis*. The last round of progress reports, issued in April 2018, emphasized, for all countries in the Western Balkans¹, inter alia, limited capacity for the designation and future management of

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package_en

NATURA 2000 sites, gaps in the effective protection of designated protected areas, and the need to fully incorporate EU standards and requirements into all legislation (for example: incorporating standards on prohibited methods of capturing and killing wild animals into legislation on hunting; improving standards and procedures for conducting and enforcing Environmental Impact Assessments; and improving the requirements and procedures for biodiversity monitoring).

A number of other important issues are also challenging for all Western Balkan countries, including: **ineffective or no management of protected areas, failure to designate marine protected areas in some countries, limited progress in transposition of EU directives, weak enforcement of nature protection laws and by-laws and lack of harmonization of laws between sectors, insufficient funding for protected areas management (no national budget), lack of cooperation between responsible governmental institutions, deficient Environmental Impact Assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment procedures, and inadequate action to prevent and sanction illegal activities.**

In Western Balkan countries, civil society organizations have been the most active stakeholders in promoting the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2020, its values and benefits. However, the role of civil society organizations in the implementation of national Biodiversity Strategies has not been clearly defined and civil society organizations face numerous barriers to participating in nature protection and biodiversity conservation at national levels (for example: limited access to information, lack of opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, and limited involvement in the implementation of policies). Given the important role of civil society organizations in moving the environment agenda forward, their participation in decision making and the implementation of the Aarhus Convention (including related EU directives) must be substantially improved.

In light of the identified shortcomings and aware of the many environmental challenges in our countries, we urge national governments and EU institutions:

- ◆ To recognize and value the contribution of civil society organizations in the nature conservation sector and to enhance opportunities for them to participate in planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting processes.
- ◆ To enable stronger inclusion of Western Balkans countries in planning the post-2020 EU Biodiversity Strategy and the development of a common framework for implementation.
- ◆ To increase financing for civil society organizations to fulfill their important role in conservation processes, including monitoring, co-management of protected areas, research, and awareness raising.
- ◆ To strengthen the European Commission's monitoring of nature protection in Western Balkan countries and to provide more effective support to national Governments in order to achieve EU standards in biodiversity conservation and public participation in decision making without further delays.
- ◆ To provide support for improving knowledge and awareness², particularly at the decision-making level, regarding the importance of nature conservation and sustainable development (balancing nature protection, economic development and social needs).
- ◆ To mainstream biodiversity into annual national budgets, with clear funding for biodiversity protection and mechanisms to ensure responsible spending.

²As stated in the 2018 Progress report for FYR of Macedonia "Nature protection obligations should be recognized and respected by the central government whenever hydropower, mining and large infrastructure investments are planned".

- ◆ To foster and support regional cooperation on biodiversity and involve national civil society organizations in the Task Force under the Regional Cooperation Council's Regional Working Group on Environment.
- ◆ To (re-)initiate discussions at EU and regional levels with relevant sectors (agriculture, forestry, energy) and incorporate these sectors into the framework of the post - 2020 EU Biodiversity Strategy.

DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION – CAPITAL FOR THE FUTURE!

Implementing the policies and standards of Chapter 27 is one of the largest challenges facing all Western Balkan countries in their path toward EU accession. **We welcome open dialogue between Governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector on biodiversity conservation as a first step toward successful cooperation.**

BioNET members and other civil society organizations stand ready to provide expertise and input at EU and national levels related to the targets of the post-2020 EU Biodiversity Strategy. We expect stronger inclusion of civil society organizations by governmental institutions in planning and implementing EU policies, including the Birds and Habitats Directives.

Croatian members of BioNET network are now focusing on the implementation of the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2020 and are eager to support other countries to implement the Strategy and other EU policies. Future planning of nature conservation in the EU and Western Balkans requires strong intersectoral cooperation. BioNET members are ready to advocate and lobby for the integration of biodiversity and nature conservation measures in different sectors.

THE POSITION PAPER “TOWARDS A POST-2020 EU BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY, WORKING REGIONALLY ON NEGOTIATION CHAPTER 27” HAS BEEN AGREED AND SUPPORTED BY BioNET MEMBERS:



Tanja Petrović
Executive director
tanja@mis.org.rs



Nataša Kovačević
Executive director
natasa.kovacevic@greenhome.co.me



Genti Kromidha
President
info@inca-al.org



Zrinka Jakl
Chairman of the Board of
Directors of the Sunce
Association
zrinka.jakl@sunce-st.org



Jovana Janjušević
Executive director
jovana.janjusevic@czip.me



Nexhmedin Ramadani
Director
ngofinch@yahoo.com



Centar za
životnu sredinu

Nataša Crnković
President
natasa.crnkovic@czzs.org



Vedran Lucić
Programme Manager
vedran.lucic@biom.hr



Aleksandër Trajçe
Managing Director
a.trajce@ppnea.org



CRNOGORSKO DRUŠTVO
EKOLOGA

Ilija Cetković
Member
ilija.cetkovic65@gmail.com



BIRD PROTECTION AND
STUDY SOCIETY OF SERBIA

Milan Ružić
Legal representative
milruzic@yahoo.com



Nermina Sarajlić
Researcher
nermina.sarajlic@ptice.ba



Robertina Brajanoska
Executive director
brajanoska@mes.org.mk

For further information please contact

Milka Gvozdenović, Young Researchers of Serbia, on behalf of BioNET members milka@mis.org.rs

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