

First SaveGREEN Transnational Experience Exchange Workshop held in Dupnitsa, Southwest Bulgaria

Partners visit large wildlife crossing facilities on Lot 1 of the Struma Motorway and discuss improvements of defragmentation measures to be integrated into the CSOP of the Rila – Verila – Kraishte pilot area

The first SaveGREEN Transnational Experience exchange workshop was held in Dupnitsa, southwestern Bulgaria, on 11-12 May 2022. The event focused on provision of information about the green corridors in the Rila – Verila – Kraishte pilot area and wildlife crossing facilities on Lot 1 of the Struma Motorway passing through it. The workshop was organised by the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation and the Black Sea NGO Network in cooperation with the associated strategic partners – the Executive Forest Agency and Southwestern State Enterprise.

The event was attended by 25 project partners from Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, as well as stakeholders and partners from the Ministry of Environment and Waters in Bulgaria, the Road Infrastructure Agency at the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, and the Municipality of Dupnitsa.

The aim of the workshop was to provide opportunities for discussion and exchange of experience on proposed mitigation measures and solutions presented in a draft of the Cross-Sectoral Operational Plan (CSOP) for the pilot area of the Rila – Verila – Kraishte eco-corridor.

The pilot area, one of eight in which project activities are concentrated, is located in the Dupnitsa Valley of the Struma River, flanked by the mountains Rila, Verila and Kraishte, to the southwest of Sofia.

The first day of the workshop involved a detailed presentation of the pilot area. Petko Tzvetkov from Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (BBF) and Andrey Kovachev from the Ministry of Environment and Waters described the natural

features of Rila – Verila – Kraishte pilot area, and summarised the importance of Natura 2000 areas and priorities and objectives in providing ecological connectivity in Bulgaria. Vanya Kamenova and Rosen Mirchev from the Southwestern State Enterprise provided a review of forest and wildlife management practices in the area.



Participants in the TNW in Bulgaria

Dr. Nina Stoilova, expert from Road Infrastructure Agency described the existing wildlife crossing facilities at the transport infrastructure of Lot 1 of the Struma Motorway (Dolna Dikanya – Dupnitsa) and the implementation of defragmentation measures. Biologist Elena Tsingarska summed up the conclusions of BBF experts who have monitored the area, a real bottleneck from the ecological point of view in the Bulgarian road and railroad infrastructure. The results show that the construction of the motorway facilities – especially the overpass for large mammals and the non-specialised viaduct – have significant drawbacks. Those conclusions were confirmed during a field trip to Lot 1 at the end of the first day. The participants identified shortcomings of the facilities and discussed possible improvements.



Visit to the bridge for large mammals over the motorway

On the following day, BBF project coordinator Petko Tzvetkov presented the CSOP for the Rila – Verila – Kraishte pilot area. Project partners shared their insights on similar defragmentation measures in their home countries and suggested the following measures:



- Raise the height and improve the maintenance of fences on both sides of the highway to prevent medium and large-sized predators and ungulates from breaching the barriers so easily.
- Take measures to reduce noise pollution at the facilities, especially the non-specialised viaduct.
- Reduce areas of excessive openness along the overpass and other facilities through additional afforestation and appropriate vegetation for wild animals.

“After monitoring and observing the facilities, our team has proposed an operational plan for the pilot area that includes the most urgent measures needed to ensure wildlife migration and ecological connectivity in this corridor,” said Tzvetkov. “The plan has been discussed and will be presented in its final form to institutions and local and national stakeholders as a SaveGREEN project output.”

The participants also visited Lot 3 of Struma Motorway, the well-known Kresna Gorge, where alternative solutions are needed to minimise the harmful impacts on the area’s rich biodiversity and unique natural features.

All in all, the project partners greatly appreciated the opportunity for fruitful exchange and the chance to see for themselves the natural beauty of the Rila – Verila – Kraishte pilot area.

“It was very good that we were able to receive first hand impressions from the pilot area and understand the local context,” said Radu Mot from the Zarand Association, Romania. “From what we saw and what we already know, there are many similarities between the pilot areas in Bulgaria and Romania. We also have territories where there is a need to speed up the development of transport infrastructure. For us, the goal is to build this very important infrastructure in the right locations with the right technology, and to adopt the right approach to save biodiversity, and especially ecological connectivity.”



Site visit to the viaduct on the Struma Motorway

The experts and national institutions also debated the need for eco-corridors to be included at the design and construction stages of newly established transport infrastructure, the lack of legislation regarding ecological connectivity in most of the countries, and other important issues.

“Bulgaria hasn’t yet constructed all its motorways, and has the unique chance to acknowledge the need for ecological corridors from the very beginning and to plan things in a better way,” remarked Hildegard Meyer, the project manager from WWF Central and Eastern Europe. “Bulgaria has better chances to do things right from the very beginning, unlike most western European countries, where the problem is that we have built our motorways decades ago in times when there has been little environmental concern. We’re now trying to rehabilitate these facilities to preserve biodiversity. But



this is much harder to do and costs more than to do things the right way from the very beginning.”

The transnational workshop was the first one in a series of events and activities of the SaveGREEN project, funded by Interreg Danube Transnational Programme. The project partners will continue to work on the critical theme of ecological corridors in the Carpathians and other mountain ranges of the Danube region.

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