Experiences on the implementation of Natura 2000 – Infringement cases from Central and Eastern Europe

Cases from Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia

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CEEweb for Biodiversity is an international network of non-governmental organizations in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. The mission of the network is the conservation of the biodiversity through the promotion of sustainable development.

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Natura 2000 in Central and Eastern Europe

Natura 2000 is a coherent ecological network of protected areas designated by the European Union’s Member States based on two legally binding pieces of legislation: the Habitats and Birds Directives. These two directives are the most crucial legal instruments of the European Union aiming for the complex protection of Europe’s biological diversity and natural heritage.

Currently, Natura 2000 constitutes of more than 26,000 sites on approx. 850,000 km², both on the continent and on the adjacent marine areas. This ecological network, which covers 18% of Europe’s territory, consists of two types of protected areas: Special Protection Areas (SPAs) are designated according to the Birds Directive (79/409/EEC) “to ensure the survival and reproduction” of the bird species mentioned in Annex I of the Directive, whilst Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) are to protect the more than 200 habitats and the approximately 1000 species listed in Annex I and II of the Habitats Directive (92/42/EEC).

After the European Union’s enlargement, the extension of Natura 2000 network to the additional countries was a challenge. Through the newly joined states, the EU was enriched by extraordinary natural values, including Europe’s last wilderness areas and diverse cultural landscapes. Unfortunately, at the same time, the extension of the common market to the region also brought with it numerous threats to these natural assets, from increased infrastructure development to intensified agricultural practices. These activities and the economic improvements that extract our natural resources, while providing us with myriads of benefits, endanger species and ecosystem services, which should be preserved for our very surviving since they provide e.g. food stocks, medicines, climate change mitigation, flood prevention and pollination. Nonetheless, these services can be lost extremely easily if we do not address their conservation properly.

For this very reason, the nature directives and Natura 2000 play a crucial role in preserving these threatened and vital values of Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the 2009 conservation status assessment of the Habitats Directive indicates that only 17% of the sites reach favourable conservation status. Therefore, the implementation of these regulations should be amended in some cases, and further deterioration and possible destruction of the to-be-protected sites should be avoided.

In order to aid a more successful realization and management of this European ecological network, this study was prepared to depict some negative examples of Natura 2000 implementation from the CEE region analyzing the problems and effects of the failed implementation, and revealing the root causes and main drivers of legal infringements of EU law.
Natura 2000 cases from Bulgaria

Bulgarian Natura 2000 sites include 228 pSCIs covering 29,5% of Bulgaria and 114 SPAs covering 20,3% of Bulgaria – in total 33,89 % of the territory of the country. The Bulgarian pSCIs are situated in the Continental, Alpine and Black Sea biogeographical regions.

After Bulgaria’s accession to the EU, remarkable issues arose concerning Natura 2000 sites. Numerous development projects affected Natura 2000 sites, where assessments were either avoided or of low quality, and conclusions for “lack of significant impact” prevailed. As there are no sanctions from the Bulgarian authorities’ side, or in most of the cases, their decisions are part of the problem, there are complaints already submitted to the EC with no progress whatsoever. It is time for actions now, otherwise the message to investors and authorities alike are that violations of EU nature conservation legislation has no consequences and problems continue to aggravate.

Windmills on the white stork’s habitats - the Kaliakra case

Two Natura 2000 sites are situated on the Black Sea coast in the region of cape Kaliakra and the adjacent Black Sea shores in North Bulgaria. The site is a bottleneck site of bird migration along Via Pontica, where every year more than 100 000 white storks, 3000 pelicans and about 10 000 raptors cross the site. The steppes and the agricultural lands of the sites are favourable places of the white storks and red breasted geese for resting and feeding. Twenty percent of these birds cross the region flying under 150 metres above the ground. These animals are endangered by the planned windmill project, new resorts and golf courses, which will destroy more than 50% of the surface of the Natura 2000 sites. The majority of these plans were approved by the authorities (RIEW Varna) without any appropriate assessment.

As a result of the improper implementation, the EC initiated an infringement procedure against the Bulgarian state. Following the pressure from the EC and the Bern Convention, the Ministry of Environment and Waters banned the building of the new windmills, solar stations and change of the land use in 2009. However, majority of the land has been already transformed with “illegal” permissions. The best solution of the site’s conservation would be that the Ministry of Environment and Waters designates the whole IBA as SPA or takes adequate compensation measures.

Unsustainable hunting of the red-breasted goose - the Shabla case
Between 80% - 90% of the world population of the globally threatened red-breasted goose spend the winter in Dobrudea in Bulgaria and Romania. The SPAs Durankulak (BG0002050) and Shabla lake complex (BG0000156) on the northeast Bulgarian coast are its main wintering places. The red-breasted goose is a protected species in Bulgaria. It spends the winter in mixed flocks with white-fronted goose, which is a game species.

Every year thousands of hunters from whole Bulgaria go to these lakes in order to hunt geese and ducks. Hunting at the Natura 2000 sites is not restricted and during the hunting season for white-fronted geese, the hunters permanently disturb the red-breasted geese as well. The geese are pushed to spend the night on the sea and many of them die exhausted in the winter. Furthermore, there is no real implementation of the protection of the red-breasted goose and every year hundreds of them are shot by hunters.

Bulgarian NGOs (BSPB and Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation) officially asked the Ministry of Environment and Water to regulate the hunting on the SPA. If the ministry fails to address the issue, a complaint to the EC will be submitted about a failure to implement the Birds Directive and to ensure the protection of red-breasted goose in Bulgaria.

Natura 2000 cases from Estonia

The Natura 2000 sites of Estonia approx. cover 16% of its land area, whereas marine habitats are designated on 685 000 ha. However, not everything is smooth with the implementation: according to Estonian Fund for Nature, not all activities possibly influencing Natura 2000 sites are subject to assessment, but only those activities, which require development consent. Also, the concept of imperative reasons of overriding public interests has turned into just “necessary for the public due to vital reasons” in the national legislation, which diminishes the importance of possible reasons to override the nature protection values, stressed in the directive. Additionally, although the current national legislation obliges to implement compensatory measures, there is still no obligation to inform the Commission about them.

Marine wind farm development - the Neugrundi case

The to-be-designated Natura 2000 site on Neugrundi marine area, a shallow part of the Baltic Sea on northwest Estonian waters near island Osmussaar, contains Natura marine habitat type 1170 Reefs. A company Neugrund OÜ has declared the will to build a wind farm on the area, which has been designated as potential area for a new Natura 2000 site, whereas local municipality also plans a marine geological park. On the other hand, several companies have had plans to build marine wind farms in Estonian waters although they were not able to give in applications until the legislation is in place.
In 2010, the EIA of the potential wind farm was completed and was open to public debate. The EIA stated that the wind farm can be built with careful planning, however, the negative impacts on long-tailed ducks cannot be avoided. Therefore, if the Ministry of Environment decides to take the area under protection, the wind farm building will not be possible.

Estonian Fund for Nature, Baltic Environmental Forum and Estonian Ornithological Society have made comments on the EIA report in 2010 and made the proposal for the Ministry of Environment to take the area under protection. The Ministry of Environment is expected to make a strategic decision about the future of the site.

*Construction on coastal and marine habitats - the Saaremaa case*

The Saaremaa fixed link (bridge or tunnel) from Estonian mainland to Muhu island is planned to be built on the Natura 2000 area Väinamere. The bridge would disturb coastal and marine habitats. Different EIA processes have been dealing with the topic, but no political decision has been made so far.

The construction company had to carry out a financial activities' analysis, feasibility studies, and environmental impact assessments of the project on Saaremaa fixed link. Based on the surveys, the Government of Estonia was not able to make a decision. The problems arose from environmental organisations and the European Union legislation – the surveys did not include Natura 2000 assessment although the fixed link was planned to be built on the Väinamere Natura 2000 site. The political will of the local municipalities and government is positive towards the building of the bridge, however, from the environmental aspect, the bridge would harm one of the biggest Estonian Natura 2000 sites.

For many years, various stakeholder groups have been consulted and provided comments to the EIA procedures, which will eventually serve as a base for the Government of Estonia to make the strategic decision. If the fixed link is constructed, the tunnel would be the best solution for Natura habitats and species.

*Natura 2000 cases from Hungary*

21% of the area of Hungary has been designated as Natura 2000 areas (SCI - 14,9 % and SPA - 14,5 %), which includes the previously protected sites and in addition to these, around 1.2 million hectares. Unfortunately, conservation in general does not have very high priority for the Hungarian Government, which is resulted in limited institutional capacities provided for conservation and week inter-sectoral cooperation. Therefore, the implementation of national and European conservation legislation is often not sufficient.
Gravel reef exploitation - the Mura case

Nimfea Environmental and Nature Conservation Association received information on plans to exploit the gravel reefs of the river Mura. According to the researches completed by the Association, the following fish species occur in the river: Danubian gudgeon (Gobio uranoscopus), Kessler’s gudgeon (Gobio kessleri), streber (Zingel streber), golden-spined loach (Sabanejewia aurata), zingel (Zingel zingel) – these are nationally protected and species of Community Importance. The reef is also a habitat for the little-ringed plover (Charadrius dubius). Gravel reefs are important breeding areas for fish species, and as such, they play an essential role in the lifecycle of Natura 2000 fish species.

Based on the above scientific facts, the Association together with another NGO submitted a legally grounded request not to issue the permission for exploitation. Despite expert opinions and statements, the authority gave the permission for exploiting the gravel. The second instance procedure on the other hand found the concerns of the two NGOs substantiated, and thus obliged the first instance to carry out the permission procedure again.

The permission procedures are in different stages for different sections of the river (independent procedure is carried out for each kilometre). So far, the permission was issued by the first instance, which was followed by a new procedure ordered by the second instance. Therefore, none of the activities are terminated yet. The overall solution would be the annulations of the permissions of such activities.

Legal difficulties in Natura 2000 enforcement - the Körösladány case

Forestry of the Southern Plain Closed Limited Company (Dalerd Co.) in 2005 came up with the idea of establishing a 500 hectare boar game park in Körösladány (in South East Hungary), in a forest rich in natural values. The forest is in favourable ecological status providing habitat to several protected plant species, and to the moth Gortyna borelii (Fisher’s Estuarine Moth) of Community importance.

Dalerd Co. did not follow the regular procedure, instead it contacted the local government of Körösladány to request, based on an independent expert’s opinion, that the locally protected status of the area should be abolished. Since there was no legal obligation to involve the nature conservation authority, the natural values were not needed to be taken into consideration. The local government of Körösladány had no idea about the background, only expected some new employment opportunities from the game park and thus the municipality was ready to comply with the request.

Dalerd Co. started the permission process at the end of 2005. The designation of Natura 2000 sites was in progress at that time. The geographically competent conservation guard
put forward the area because of the presence of the moth Gortyna borelii (Fisher’s Estuarine Moth) but the designation process somehow stopped. Unfortunately, the documentation filed at the National Park did not reveal the causes, why. The first important failure of the national nature conservation can be seen here. Especially regarding the fact that the European Union later found that the habitats of this moth are not sufficiently represented among the Hungarian Natura 2000 sites.

Nimfea Environmental and Nature Conservation Association regularly monitors the area, this way it got knowledge about the planned game park, and notified the National Park. This was the second failure: the National Park at this stage found out about the decreased protection level, in which case it should have started an ex officio procedure. However, no legal actions were taken.

The Association asked Dalerd Co. not to establish the game park, asked the notary of Körösladány not to permit the construction of the fence, asked the competent nature conservation authority (Körös-vidéki Directorate for Environment, Nature Conservation and Water) to prevent the destruction of natural values, asked the competent department of Agricultural Ministry to withdraw the issued permit and filed a claim to the Public Prosecutor. All of the addressed authorities and agencies declared that the case is either not their territories or not their jurisdictional competence.

Meanwhile the Association initiated legal proceedings, which resulted in various outcomes including the restoration of the protected status of the site and surprisingly, a lawsuit against the Association. The potential solution would include independent experts, not only those listed in the official expert register, especially, if there is no official expert with relevant expertise or the appointed expert has a conflict of interest. Also, officials should be encouraged to prevent cases, and to apply the precautionary principle in practice, not just taking actions AFTER natural values are damaged.

**Natura 2000 cases from Poland**

In Poland, SCIs cover approx. 11%, SPAs 15,5% of the country’s territory with an additional 6500 km² marine sites. Poland, similarly to the other new Member States, also has some deficiencies in the implementation of the Habitats and Birds Directive, such as illegal local exclusion of some species from protection, insufficient SEA and EIA procedures, and not fully transposed articles (e.g. 3(2) and 6(2)). The reason behind these impediments is mainly the lack of institutional capacity.
Local farmers vs. Natura 2000 - the Brzozowka case

Drainage of Brzozowka River was requested by local farmers to be permitted from the regional government of Podlasie. Due to intensification of agriculture practices, farmers want to regulate the river to avoid floods. Brzozowka River is an affluent of Biebrza river, a natural, meandering watercourse, which last 12 km are included in the Biebrza National Park. The modification of water conditions in Brzozowka negatively influences the Biebrza ecosystem itself and the habitats depending on water and their wild inhabitants.

The hydrological expertise was prepared by specialists in 2009. The document showed that due to the geomorphological landscape conditions the drainage will not improve the agriculture practices on the long term. There were a few meetings of the Regional Government and the park authority with the farmers, even the Minister of Environment was present. In spite of this, the farmers still disagree and continuously insist on draining the river.

The case of the Brzozowka river is not an individual example. There are more unsatisfied Biebrza valley inhabitants whose meadows are flooded every year and who cannot enlarge the farms because of the Natura 2000 sites and the national park. The potential solution should be worked out in cooperation with the farmers: the development of local product market and the ecotourism look promising. To aid cooperation processes, the quality of agriculture advisers could be improved.

Unsustainable tourism - the Drawa case

The increased canoe-traffic on the Drawa and Korytnica river (approx. 20 thousand people annually, concentrated in July and August), is accepted by the Drawa National Park. These rivers are habitats of sensitive animals such as otter (*Lutra lutra*) and kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*). Too many people canoeing in July and August adversely influences the animals’ behaviour on the protected area, which must be considered as negative impact on the Natura 2000 sites conservation objectives.

Naturalists Club Poland is collecting all relevant information including precise data about the heavy canoe traffic. The problem was expressed in some letters to the Drawa National Park and to the Ministry of Environment. The case is one of the illustrations in complaint submitted by the Naturalists Club to EC for non-effectiveness of HD art 6(2) in Poland.

Action must be taken to establish and execute reasonable limits of tourists’ (canoeists) number, and an „Annual protection action plan” for the national park, containing rules for public access to the park, should be worked out and assessed from a Natura 2000 perspective.
EU funded new development disturbs bird migration – the Modlin Airport Case

The construction of a new airport for low-cost flight companies is planned by the reconstruction of old, practically non-used local military airport. In opinion of the naturalists, flight operations would disturb the bird sites in the Natura 2000 site Dolina Środkowej Wisły and would disturb the local migrations of birds. Other locations were not considered. The building of the airport is planned to be financed by the EU Structural Funds.

Ogólnopolskie Towarzystwo Ochrony Ptaków (Birdlife Poland) and Naturalists Club Poland participate in the project authorisation process by submitting their (negative) opinions. However, the project was approved by the local government Nowy Dwór Mazowiecki as non-affecting Natura 2000 sites. Therefore, re-appellation to the Administration Court and complaint to the EC may be processed, if necessary. It is suggested by the NGOs that other locations should be re-considered and environmental impact assessment must be properly assessed including indirect and cumulative effects. Effects of the future exploitation (flight operations) must also be analyzed in the EIA/N2000 impact procedure besides the effects of the building process.

Natura 2000 cases from Romania

Romania has 273 SCIs and 108 SPAs protecting biodiversity on around 2800 km², which is about 17% the country’s territory. The status of nature protection legislation is lower than the organic laws in the legal system of Romania. The requirements of the EU directives were poorly integrated into the sectoral policies (agriculture, land, forestry, etc.). Additionally, there are administration gaps as well, since it is not clear who has the responsibility of the implementation.

Administration failures and lack of enforcement - the Câmpia Crişului Alb case

In Arad county 360 ha of grassland (haymaking fields and grazing fields) were ploughed. 263 ha of these destroyed grasslands were located in SPA. These fields were primal feeding terrains for rollers (Coracias garullus), lesser grey shrikes (Lanius minor), Montagu’s harriers (Circus pygargus), migratory whimbrels (Numenius phaeopus) and especially for of red footed falcons (Falco vespertinus), which had three colonies nearby.

A complaint was addressed to the Environmental Protection Agency (APM). From the reply, it became clear that there was no petition presented to the APM for the ploughing, so it was an illegal act of the landowner. After this, a complaint was addressed to the National Environmental Guard (Garda Naţională de Mediu - GNM). The answer was outrageous: it revealed that the destruction of the grasslands (turning it into arable land) increased the
quality of the territory, and because the above mentioned species do not nest in grasslands and because “arable lands sustain higher densities of insects than grasslands”, this ploughing can be even beneficial for the red-footed falcons and the other species. After this, a complaint was addressed to the European Commission by the Milvus Group.

It is expected that a warning or other measure from the European Commission would change the attitude of Romanian environmental authorities to treat nature protection issues more seriously. It is necessary to impose a serious penalty for the owners of the land for not announcing the intention of the destruction to the authorities and to draw the attention and the willingness to act of the nature protection authorities regarding similar problems.

**A quarry on falcon’s nest - the Greci quarry case**

A quarry is planned to be established in SPA, SCI and very close to the Munţii Măcinului National Park. The company is leasing 73 ha of land, and plan to exploit 5 ha right away. The land has very rich steppe biodiversity, including one of the last three saker falcon (*Falco cherrug*) nests in Romania. The environmental impact assessment was very detailed and of high quality, but it was focused only on the 5 ha, not mentioning the other 68 ha. After the complaints of NGOs, the EIA was completed, and the authorities illegally gave permit without announcing the new EIA for public dispute.

A complaint was addressed to the Environmental Protection Agency (APM) by the NGOs, in which they highlighted that the project affects 26 Natura 2000 species, most of them significantly. They asked the remaking of the EIA study focusing on the whole 73 ha and the cumulative effects. When the APM gave the permit for the quarry without public dispute of the new study, the three NGOs addressed the European Commission.

Infringement procedure is expected against Romania because of the violation of European legislation. The solution would be the annulations of the project implementation. Much more serious approach is needed in the future from authorities regarding the legislation of environmental and nature protection.

**Natura 2000 cases from Slovakia**

Almost 30% of Slovakia is designated as pSCI and SPA. While there are no known gaps in the transposition of the nature directives into national legislation, the lack of financial sources for the elaboration and particularly for the implementation of management plans for Natura 2000 sites and species remain a challenge. Information flow and communication between state authorities and stakeholders need to improve and administration capacity needs to increase along with improved monitoring practice.
Game reserve extension – the Biely Potok case

An existing game preserve, Biely Potok, near the villages of Trstie and Pruzina was recently enlarged from around 70 ha to approximately 240 ha. It is a part of Landscape Protected Area Strážovské vrchy (2nd level of protection out of 5 levels according to the Act No. 543/2002 Coll. on Nature and Landscape Protection). It overlaps with Natura 2000 sites and crosses regional bio-corridor of high importance. The area is surrounded by a fence which is 17.5 km long and approx. three metres high. As a result, species cannot use traditional migration routes and have restricted access to water sources, too. The fence also threatens birds, especially nocturnal species, which do not see the fence and can be very easily trapped. The public is not allowed to enter the area without permission although it was intensively used for recreation and tourism in the past.

NGOs supported by locals and nature conservation experts submitted a protest to the Regional Court in Trenčín. The protest is nowadays being evaluated. Next steps to be taken depend on the results of the ongoing evaluation of the protest. If necessary, complaint to the EC will be considered.

An Environmental Impact Assessment procedure needs to be carried out, including setting of specific conditions under which it would be possible to remove the fence and allow migration of the species through the area. In the meantime, it would be necessary to secure the functioning of the bio-corridor.

Improper forestry practice - The Tatra case

In November 2004, a strong windstorm hit, amongst other territories, the Tatra National Park (TANAP). Almost 90% (12 500 hectares) of the affected area was completely swept down; out of it 4 050 ha fall in pSCI and SPA. The majority of the affected area in pSCI was nature reserve and proposed zone A with strict protection regime. A day after the natural catastrophe, forest management authorities started cleaning the area stating that preventive measures against floods, fire and bark beetle outbreak are urgently needed. This approach was strongly opposed by environmental organizations and experts who suggested implementing systematic approach based on scientific knowledge.

WOLF complained to the European Commission, which subsequently asked for explanation from the Slovak Republic, particularly regarding Article 6 of the Habitats Directive and Article 4 of the Birds Directive. The response elaborated by Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Agriculture was based on the urgent need to prevent floods, fire and bark beetle outbreak as described above. An expert study was developed to support this argument. Based on the study, logging in nature reserves Ticha and Koprova valley started in April 2007. At the same time, EC was evaluating the response of the Slovak Republic. Since EC did not receive a
response to its second warning, at the end of June 2007 it started an infringement procedure against Slovakia. The infringement process was based on expert opinions and the Commission’s own surveys and consultations.

Recently the zonation of TANAP was re-evaluated and re-shaped taking into account conflicts between forest management and protection of the most valuable areas, such as Ticha and Koprova valley and other areas with strict protection regime.

At the moment, no assistance is needed. Slovak NGOs are closely monitoring actions related to this issue and activities of the forest management authorities on the area. Future steps very much depend on the zonation of TANAP, which is under development. It can be said that public involvement (national campaign, public gatherings in front of the ministries) and a petition have played a crucial role in the process and had led to the re-evaluation of the zonation.

Overall lessons

The above presented cases and the further ones received from these countries (please, see more cases on www.ceeweb.org) provide some insights to the problems Natura 2000 implementation usually faces in Central and Eastern Europe. Although from these cases a coherent and intricate conclusion cannot be drawn, they could underline theory with practical instances and provide some feedbacks on the main drivers of Natura 2000 disturbances or even destructions and the improper enforcement of the nature directives. Based on them, recommendations can be put forward to address the underlying causes and avoid similar problems in the future.

It is worthwhile analysing the problem on two levels. On one hand, it is important to understand the pressures affecting Natura 2000 sites and socio-economic drivers behind them, which is an increasing challenge for enforcing the nature directives in the region. On the other hand, it is necessary to look at the capacities of authorities to enforce the legislation as well as the supporting environment, which also includes the awareness and the watchdog function of stakeholders.

Since the accession to the EU, there has been growing pressure on ecosystems in the new Member States in terms of use of land, natural resources and pollution. The collected cases from the fields of energy, mining, transport, tourism and agriculture illustrate this trend. Increasing competition, intensification of agriculture, growing transport needs and investment in the energy and mining sector are the drivers of growing pressures on ecosystems. In addition, the relatively many conflicts between hunting and nature conservation as well as between water management and nature conservation among this non-representative collection of examples prove the inconsistency and incoherence of
natural resource management policies. This calls for the rethinking of EU and national economic and natural resource use policies, with the aim of limiting total environmental pressures. Only changing the boundary conditions of economy, such as limiting resource use, can curb the growing pressures on ecosystems. At the same time, this shall be complemented by coherent land use policies, where the sustainable use of land is achieved through proper measures. Without such policy changes the environmental pressure on Natura 2000 sites and the number of infringement cases will continue to increase along with the pressure on authorities to control them.

While tackling the problem at the root causes is the most effective way, it is also necessary to build the capacities of authorities and stakeholders on systemic, institutional and individual levels to deal with the individual cases. The collected examples point out to the following constraints in many countries:

- limited financial sources to elaborate and implement Natura 2000 management plans and monitoring of sites,
- low human and financial capacities in the administration sector, especially regarding authorities,
- low awareness, insufficient information flow and communication among stakeholders including state authorities, private sector and landowners,
- improper attitude of authorities and lack of willingness to follow adequate procedures in some cases,
- low capacities of NGOs to detect and put up a legal fight in case of infringements,
- legal gaps regarding environmental assessments, for instance related to cumulative effects, independency of expertise, considering alternatives,
- improper legal environment to enable NGOs and other stakeholders to participate in permission and infringement procedures.

Based on these problems, some recommendations can be put forward in order to reinforce the work of authorities and other stakeholders:

- Increase earmarked financial resources for Natura 2000 implementation including the preparation and implementation of management plans and monitoring (both for the state and the civil sectors),
- Raise awareness about Natura 2000 legislation and legal proceedings within the administration sector,
- Promote and raise awareness about Natura 2000, its benefits and legislation among stakeholders and citizens,
- Improve communication, information dissemination and better cooperation among stakeholders,
- Increase human and financial capacities within the administration sector, especially authorities,
- Amend the legislation related to environmental assessments and the participation of NGOs and other stakeholders in legal procedures.

As the enforcement of EU legislation is primarily the responsibility of national institutions, capacity building on national level is essential. However, it should be also investigated how EU level actions can support national efforts, and proposals should be elaborated in that regard as well.
Acknowledgements and credits

We would like to thank all of the contributing organizations, who continuously fulfil their watchdog role and invest vast amount of time and efforts to protect our natural heritage.

BROZ, Slovakia

The Bratislava Regional Association for Nature Conservation (BROZ) was founded in 1997. The major focus is primarily on practical nature conservation and sustainable development promotion in Western Slovakia. The organisation’s main goal is to protect and restore nature in the Bratislava region - particularly in the Danube, the Little Carpathians and Záhorí, but also in Bratislava itself and occasionally in other locations in Slovakia. Their activities build on the rich experience and traditions of the Slovak Bratislava voluntary and protectionist work. Further information: http://www.broz.sk/

Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation

The Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation emerged from an intergovernmental Bulgarian-Swiss Biodiversity Conservation Programme in 1997. Since its creation BBF has supported efforts of the Bulgarian Government and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in implementing sustainable management practices in seven key regions of Bulgaria – Central Balkan, Dobrudja, Bourgas Wetlands, Strandja, Eastern Rhodopes and Pirin.

The BBF team has carried out numerous direct nature conservation activities; developed eleven action plans for endangered species and twelve management plans for protected areas; submitted documentation for declaring eleven new protected areas including three new nature parks, and three new Ramsar sites. Their “Small Grants Fund” supported the activities of more than 60 nature conservation organisations all over the country.

The evolving and continuing commitment of BBF is developing towards the integration of biodiversity into all human activities rather than its initial role of strict protection. Further information: http://www.bbf.biodiversity.bg/

Estonian Fund for Nature

Sea, forest and wetlands – the aim of the Estonian Fund for Nature (Eestimaa Looduse Fond – ELF) is to preserve the entire Estonian nature and its diversity. Since 1991, the voluntary civic association in cooperation with many people and organizations has been the leader of various wildlife conservation projects important to Estonia. On the initiative of ELF, natural
parks and wildlife preserves have been established; also extensive inventories to map Estonia’s natural resources have been carried out. Further information: http://www.elfond.ee/

**Milvus Group, Romania**

The Association for Bird and Nature Protection “Milvus Group” is a non-profit, non-governmental organization, acting in the fields of education, research and advisement, in order to make Romania a better place for birds, wildlife and people. A few very enthusiastic young bird-watchers founded the Milvus in autumn 1991. Soon after this, they joined the Romanian Ornithological Society, becoming its branch in Tirgu Mures. Since the end of 2001 the Association for Bird and Nature Protection “Milvus Group” has become an independent registered NGO. Further information: http://milvus.ro

**Naturalists Club Poland**

Naturalists Club Poland is an independent, non-governmental organization working in the field of nature conservation and environmental education. The organization is active in all Poland, especially in its western and northern part. The Club leads varied activities, e.g. collects data about nature in Poland, publishes books, the scientific quarterly “Nature Review” (Przegląd Przyrodniczy), the bulletin "Bociek" and holds an Internet bookstore. The Club makes nature inventories, carries out researches, gives expert opinions, develops conservation plans and methods, organizes trips and workshops, runs nature museums, breeds sheep etc. Further information: http://www.kp.org.pl/

**Nimfea Environmental and Nature Conservation Association, Hungary**

Nimfea Nature Conservation Association was established in 1993 on the initiative of college students, later in 1995 the central office was established in Türkeve. Now the central office of Nimfea and its member organizations give work to more than 10 full-time employees. First the main activities of the organization were nature conservation and environmental education, then the scope of activities gradually expanded and included for instance the democracy development framework program, which was created with the aim of strengthening local civil society. Currently their programs are related to biodiversity conservation, environment protection, rural development, democracy development, awareness raising and the preservation of cultural heritage. Further information: http://www.nimfea.hu