Eastern Partnership (EaP) Event on Nature Protection and Biodiversity

Brussels-Kalmthout, 2-5 June 2015

The event was organised within the framework of the EaP Panel on Environment and Climate Change. It gathered participants from all six EaP countries, EaP Civil Society Forum, REC-Moldova and REC-Caucasus, NGOs and EU services (EEAS, DG ENV, DG NEAR). It consisted of a seminar on nature protection and biodiversity and a study visit to a nature protection site covered by a LIFE project. The participants also had a chance to take part in the Green Week which was focused on "Nature - our health, our wealth".

At the beginning of the seminar EEAS updated the participants on the recent developments in Eastern partnership, notably the Riga Summit and Riga Declaration, the ENP review, and the developments in relation to EU cooperation with some countries in the region.

During the seminar the participants learned about the EU legislation on nature protection: the Habitats Directive and the Birds Directive. The Directives were successful in protecting fauna and flora in the EU and could serve as an example for establishing similar levels of nature conservation in the partner countries. A representative of the Secretariat of the Bern Convention spoke about the support to Eastern Partnership countries in the establishment of the Bern Convention’s network of nature protected areas, known as Emerald network, based on the experience of the EU Natura 2000 network. This project is appreciated by the partner countries and seen as a concrete action to protect environment.

DG ENV also presented the Invasive Alien Species Regulation and explained that a list of invasive alien species of Union concern will be prepared at the beginning of next year. Alien species which threaten population of local species, pose a problem across Europe. For example, grey squirrel originated from North America pushes out domestic red squirrel from habitat; giant hogweed native of the Caucasus mountains spreads across Eastern Europe and can be poisonous to people. An integrated and coherent approach to preventing and controlling invasive species is provided by the Regulation.

A broader context was given by presenting the EU Biodiversity Strategy and EU objectives under the Convention on Biological Diversity. Global efforts, including at sub-regional level, as covered by the Eastern Partnership, are needed to provide for efficient action to halt biodiversity loss and restore population of endangered species. Participants were informed about the upcoming Midterm Review of the EU Biodiversity Strategy.

Representatives of international NGOs: Birdlife Europe, Friends of the earth Europe and European Environmental Bureau discussed the ways of protecting the nature and their contribution and role to play in this endeavour. These organisations carry out activities and have partners, or will have, in the EaP countries as well. The RECs gave their opinion on the role of civil society in ensuring the adequate environmental protection at national level. Transparent relations with governments and awareness raising among the public were
mentioned as the most crucial elements. They mentioned as well the high importance of cooperation with the closer neighbour in facing challenges as: degradation of the habitats, illegal logging, etc.

DG ENV informed participants about the possibilities that the LIFE Programme gives to support projects on nature protection. It is also possible, under several conditions, for organisations based in the partner countries to take advantage of the Programme. A concrete example of LIFE ELIA project was presented. This transboundary project run by a consortium led by a private electric company restores land and habitats which were destroyed for construction of electricity lines, taking into account local economy, creating job opportunities and improving business. The project has lots of potential for replication throughout Europe.

The partner countries shared their experience in nature protection and progress in achieving the Aichi target. All countries have mechanisms for protecting nature and there are good examples of transboundary cooperation between the countries in the region or between EU and bordering EaP countries. They highlighted several similar pressures on their natural environment (e.g., land degradation, habitat fragmentation, soil erosion, use of pesticides, overexploitation of natural resources, pollution, illegal practices such as poaching and illegal logging, IAS etc.). Among the challenges and things needed to provide for a sustainable system of nature protection the countries mentioned:

- the need to strengthen the ministries for environment and their role (influence) in the government;
- better integration of nature conservation issues into sector policies, particularly emphasising farming/agriculture, energy, development projects and urban-land use planning, and mining;
- measuring and recognising the economic value of ecosystems and their services;
- making use (sharing experience) of economic incentives and instruments to promote practices that support nature conservation goals in particular in the agricultural sector;
- direct participation of communities in planning and actions on the ground;
- better implementation and enforcement of existing legislation;
- cooperation with private sector;
- creation of local solutions to avoid unwanted people's behaviour;
- abiding by the multilateral environmental agreements;
- the need for additional funds/resources;
- More scientific research;
- watch-dogs and whistle-blowers' activities.

Surprisingly, little was said about the need for financial solutions; moreover, that the sources of financing nature protection are insufficient in most of the countries.
Conflict of interests between economy and nature, poaching, illegal logging, climate change and urbanisation were named as the biggest dangers to nature protection.

The participants appreciated the EU assistance on issues related to biodiversity and nature protection. This support should be continued; however, there were no strong views expressed as to the focus of future assistance. The participants found, nevertheless, the exchange of knowledge and views as provided by the seminar very valuable.

The study visit to Kalmthout aimed at showing the concrete example of LIFE project and its contribution to restore endangered habitats, including eradication of invasive alien species. The participants were received by the project manager who explained the history and achievements of the project. This particular project deals with protection of inland dune habitat (dune grasslands, heaths etc.). There was also a walking tour of the site provided.

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