



A comprehensive monitoring report issued by the European Commission on Croatia's state of preparedness for EU membership has detected significant gaps in the implementation of EU environmental law. In particular, the report criticizes the insufficient quality of Environmental Impact Assessment studies (EIAs) and finds that they are not in line with EU standards. Also affected is a protected area, which in future will extend to Serbia: The Gornje Podunavlje Nature Reserve shall become part of an international Mura-Drava-Danube UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

EIAs of insufficient quality have secured the approval of major environmentally destructive river regulation projects by Croatia's Ministry of Environment. The findings of the report reflect criticism already put forward by WWF, EuroNatur and Croatian NGOs, pointing out seven damaging regulation projects on the rivers Danube, Drava, Mura, Sava, Neretva and Ombla.

NGOs had repeatedly warned that more than 500 kilometres of Croatia's natural rivers are at risk of being turned into canals. They had argued that the EIA's did not assess the projects' environmental impact properly and contradicted EU law. Nevertheless, five out of the seven projects have already gained approval by the Croatian Ministry of Environment. The decision on two projects is still pending.

The EC determines that the respective EIAs were of "insufficient quality" and recommends that they are "significantly improved".

"It's evident that according to the EC these environmentally damaging regulation projects should never have been approved by the Croatian Ministry of Environment. We therefore urge Minister Mihael Zmajlović to stop them right away", said Arno Mohl, International Freshwater Officer at WWF.

"We are confident that in the eve of Croatia's EU-accession, Minister Zmajlović will want to prove that Croatia fits in where EU environmental standards are concerned. We encourage him to use the EC findings in the face of pressure from the water management lobby. We would like to see him become an advocate for Croatia's unique rivers rather than allow for their destruction. Croatian rivers form some of our most precious common European natural heritage", Mohl said.

Highly controversial and still pending a decision is the regulation of 53 kilometres of the Danube River in the transboundary area of Croatia and Serbia, and the regulation of the Drava-Mura confluence on the Hungarian-Croatian border. Home to some of Europe's largest and best preserved wetlands and floodplain forests as well as to endangered species such as the White-tailed eagle, Black stork and Ship sturgeon, these areas belong to the core zone of the Transboundary UNESCO Biosphere Reserve „Mura-Drava-Danube". In July 2012 the Hungarian-Croatian part of the reserve was designated by UNESCO. Once Austria, Serbia and Slovenia join in, the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve will span five countries.

Croatia's unique rivers provide free ecosystem services like flood protection, water purification and climate change mitigation and, hence, are of extreme importance for the well being of people. Straightening and channeling the natural river would massively harm the already vulnerable river landscapes and lead to irreversible loss of nature and wildlife.
Source Serbia Energy Magazine