



# CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE AND NATURAL HABITATS

*43<sup>rd</sup> Standing Committee, November 29<sup>th</sup> – December 1<sup>st</sup> 2023*

## **On-the-spot appraisal**

### **Possible impacts of infrastructure and urbanisation developments on the Vjosë-Nartë Protected Area**

*in the framework of the*

*Bern Convention Open case-file no. 2016/05: Presumed negative impact of hydro-power plant development on the Vjosa river, Albania, T-PVS/Files(2022)67*

*AEWA Implementation Review Process case file No.11: Airport construction at Vjosa-Narta Protected Landscape, Albania, AEW IRP case file No. 11*

*CMS Review Mechanism File No.2021/01 - Project development at Vjosa-Narta Protected Landscape, Albania, CMS RM File No.2021/01*

Prepared by

the independent expert Lazaros Georgiadis



## The implementation of the mission

The On-the-Spot Appraisal (OSA) took place from 29 August to 2 September 2022 with meetings:

- in **Tirana, Fier, Vlora** and the *Vjosa-Delta-Narta Lagoon Protected Area* and its surroundings;
- with **Ministries, National and Local Agencies, authorities, and NGOs.**

Based on the OSA, three sets of findings can be outlined:

a) The information provided by a questionnaire

b) The information collected during the OSA meetings with the governmental institutions, the Complainants and other stakeholders.

c) The observations made during the OSA field visit at the airport, the Vjosa-Delta-Narta Lagoon Protected Area and its surroundings.



## Additional information received in 2023



The reports provided by:

- The government of Albania, dated on 24th October 2023;
- The complainants, dated on 8th November 2023.

The acknowledgement of the effort of the Albanian Government:

- To proceed the case of the Vjosa river National Park;
- To establish a Working Group for the on-site verification of the impact on the environment from the implementation of the project of the Vlora airport.

But, also, pointed out that:

- The status of the Vjosa River Delta and the Narta Lagoon areas are not included in the borders of the Vjosa River National Park, a fact that increases the concerns of the effectiveness of the conservation strategies toward solving the conflicts with the construction of the Vlora airport and the urbanization of the surrounding zones;
- The establishment of the Working Group for the on-site verification of the impact on the environment from the implementation of the project of the Vlora airport is referring to the verification of the situation and the impact after the construction of the airport and not in order to collect data “before” the construction of the airport and re-develop a new EIA based on high quality data;
- The construction of the Vlora airport is in full development despite the concerns raised by the Bern Convention and the Recommendation no 2019/2023 and the framework of the legal procedures that initiated by NGOs and not yet finalized:



## PROVISIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS



- 1) Suspend the construction of Vlora International Airport until a new and sufficient Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure is conducted, as well as a Proper/Appropriate Assessment.
  
- 2) Initiate a comprehensive Wildlife Monitoring Programme in the complex of habitats around Narta Lagoon - Vjosa Delta – Karavasta Lagoon with the following elements:
  - aiming to investigate, analyse and make available detailed information on the presence and movements of avifauna (between breeding, roosting and feeding sites) and other important species, such as bats, for at least two, but preferably three years;
  - following, amongst others, the AEWA Guidelines on Waterbird Monitoring, and using modern tools such as bat detectors;
  - protected breeding land birds and open land sections used by birds of prey must be included in the monitoring, registering the critical habitats for these species;
  - the use of agricultural fields and the seminatural zones by the birds during the breeding, wintering and migration periods should also be recorded especially for sites close to the four candidate airport areas.



## PROVISIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3) Re-evaluate carefully the alternative locations for the airport site by:
  - a. Assessing the environmental and safety risks in all alternative locations for the airport based on evidence from long-term data and the Wildlife Monitoring Programme as described in point 2 of this Recommendation.
  - b. Considering the avoidance option in the Mitigation Hierarchy, for example, by enlarging Tirana International Airport or connecting Tirana and southern Albania with a highspeed railway, instead of constructing Vlora International airport.
- 4) Revise the existing EIA based on the Wildlife Monitoring Programme in point 2 of this Recommendation and create a draft Environmental Management Plan and Environmental Safety Management Plan for all alternative sites for the airport, evaluating the risks and safety for humans, birds and other biodiversity. Consideration should be given to other relevant processes and standards, such as the Commission Regulation (EU) No 139/2014 and ICAO guidelines, processes and standards.
- 5) In relation to the aforementioned Wildlife Monitoring Programme for all candidate sites organise a tender at European level to attract the best expertise on bird and other wildlife strike prevention in order to maximise the assessment of both the conservation and safety risk.



## PROVISIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6) Based on the data obtained by the Wildlife Monitoring Programme, adopt and implement an ecosystem approach, as advocated by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which mainstream biodiversity into transport infrastructure planning, considering the fact that ecosystems and protected areas are not isolated but interconnected, open and functional systems and promote the conservation and sustainable use of the environment in an equitable way.
  
- 7) In order to recognise the terrestrial, water and aerial corridors for wildlife at national level and avoid future infrastructure – biodiversity conflicts, update the National Transport Master Plan in parallel with a National Green Infrastructure Master Plan. To maximise their impact and promote alignment with other European mechanisms, relevant strategies and policies should also be considered when developing these plans, such as the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), the Trans-European Nature Network (TEN-N) and the EU Green Deal, as well as:
  - a. Recommendation No 25 (1991) of the Bern Convention on the conservation of natural areas outside protected areas proper; and
  - b. Article 10 of the EU Habitat Directive on ensuring the ecological connectivity and the coherence of the Natura 2000 Network.



## PROVISIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS



- 8) Start an intensive capacity building programme on sustainable infrastructure development and biodiversity conservation. An international event such as a workshop or conference inviting experts and organisations from other parts of Europe and beyond could be a fundamental starting point.
- 9) Support the implementation of the idea of the Free European River of Vjosa in cooperation with Greece, considering:
  - a. The need to develop the River Basin Management Plan, ideally at cross-border level, including climate change adaptations and biodiversity conservation;
  - b. The initiative to create the Vjosa National Park (IUCN category II) including the Delta of Vjosa and the Narta Lagoon, in relation to the National Plan for Areas of National Importance;
  - c. The development of the Local Detailed Development Plan related to the areas of the Delta and Areas of National Importance, with full respect of, and priority toward, biodiversity conservation.





## PROVISIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10) Build a deeper cooperation with the full spectrum of stakeholders who can be engaged in an informative, consultative, or collaborative way in infrastructure development projects. In particular, initiate collaborations with the most relevant NGOs, using their expertise to fulfil the needs and obligations for biodiversity conservation in Albania.
- 11) Following the Proposal of a post-2020 Workplan of the Evaluation on the 2011-2020 Emerald Network Workplan in Albania as part of the Cluster 4 of the West Balkan countries, and taking into account the lack of progress to submit an updated database, as well as the list of “typical” activities for Phase I of the workplan, efforts should be made to:
  - a. Develop a pilot project (full project which includes also inventories and data collection), in cooperation with relevant NGOs and other stakeholders, for the complex of protected areas of Narta-Vjosa Delta-Karabasta in combination with point 2 of this Recommendation;
  - b. Create a first database submission (data collection, data recording and submission);
  - c. Use results and data from the proposed pilot project and Wildlife Monitoring Programme to identify key routes of birds’ used by birds to move between the wetlands and take these findings into account when drafting the Management Plan for "Nartë-Pishë Poro" protected area and developing the Vjosa River Basin Management Plan in the framework of the designation of the National Park of Vjosa River.





## THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

Acknowledging especially the Albanian authorities, the complainants

Mrs. Ursula Sticker and Mr. Eoghan Kelly with the Secretariat of the Bern Convention and

Mr Ivan Ramirez from CMS and Mr Sergey Dereliev from AEWA

for the excellent cooperation and support

The Mission's independent expert

Lazaros Georgiadis