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Open File: 2022/03

**Wolf Culling Policy in Norway
(Norway)**

- COMPLAINANT REPORT -

Document prepared by
Margareth Konst, Ragnhild Sollund, Stefanie Reinhardt and NOAH

To:

Bureau of the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention
bern.convention@coe.int

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**Fifth progress report on complaint no. 2022/03
Wolf Culling Policy in Norway**

In reference to the letter of 20 December 2024 by the Secretary of the Bern Convention, complainants NOAH – for animal rights, Margareth Konst, asst. prof. Stefanie Reinhardt and prof. Ragnhild Sollund (referred to as “the Complainants”) are hereby submitting an update report to the spring 2025 Bureau meeting, addressing particularly the efforts, if any, the government of Norway has made to follow up the decision by the Standing Committee, adopted on 6 December 2024, to elevate the status of the complaint to “Open File”. In the decision, the Standing Committee established that Norway is in breach of Article 9 of the Convention and called upon the government of Norway to abstain from culling entire wolf packs and territory-marking pairs in the wolf zone. It also expressed strong concern with the extremely restricted population target and invited the government of Norway to prioritise proven, non-lethal measures of damage reduction and conflict mitigation, and to step up the promotion of long-term co-existence between humans and wolves based on the available best practice.

Summary

The Norwegian government authorized culling of wolf packs and territory-marking pairs in the wolf zone also this winter and the so-called license hunt for population control has until now resulted in the culling of 6 wolves out of a

total culling quota of 43 wolves. The wolf population in Norway is at 54-59 wolves as of 5 February 2025. The government has stated that the decision of the Standing Committee on the opening of a case-file does not give a ground for changes in Norway's wolf management and that its wolf culling policy is in accordance with the Bern Convention. The NGOs tried to stop the license hunt in the wolf zone by applying for a preliminary injunction at the court, based on the decision of the Standing Committee. This was initially granted but later revoked by the court. The government argued at the court proceedings that the decision on the opening of a case-file does not establish that Norway is in breach of the Bern Convention; furthermore, the decision has no legal significance for the management of wolves in Norway, because the Committee lacks the competence to issue authoritative interpretations of the Convention and there is no legal analysis of Norway's international obligations in the decision. By authorizing yet another culling of wolves in the wolf zone, the Ministry has used its discretionary powers beyond what the Supreme Court has ruled to be within the limits of the law and set aside scientific data and expert assessments. There is no indication that the government intends to change the course of its wolf culling policy. In the Complainants' view, Norway continues to breach Articles 2, 4, 6 and 9 of the Bern Convention.

1. License hunting of wolves in winter 2024/2025 and an update on the wolf population

As highlighted in the Complainants' update report of 4 November 2024, the regional large carnivore committees in Norway had adopted quotas for population control (license hunting) of wolves in the wolf zone (12 wolves) and outside the wolf zone (27 wolves, mostly lone vagrant wolves, but also territory-marking pairs) in winter 2024/2025 and spring 2025, making the total quota for population control in Norway at **39 wolves**. These quotas were challenged by environmental organizations but upheld by the Ministry of Climate and the Environment (hereinafter *the Ministry*).¹

NOAH - for animal rights, Dronningens gate 13, 0152 Oslo
E-mail: katrin@dyrsrettigheter.no Phone: +47 95 94 44 99

NOAH sent a letter to the Ministry on 6 December 2024, encouraging to follow up the newly issued decision of the Standing Committee “to abstain from culling entire wolf packs and territory-marking pairs in the wolf zone”. The Ministry nevertheless adopted a decision on 20 December on the culling of two wolf packs and any remaining wolves in a third pack and thereby confirmed the total quota for the culling of 12 wolves in the wolf zone, with the possibility to increase the quota in case more wolves are detected in the relevant wolf territories.

The wolf culling in the wolf zone lasts until 15 February, and per 14 February, 4 wolves have been killed; the wolf culling outside the wolf zone started on 1 December 2024 and lasts until 31 May; so far, 2 wolves have been killed.

In the north of the country (Troms and Finnmark), the regional large carnivore committee adopted on 24 January 2025 a quota for license hunting of four wolves in the period of 15 March – 31 May, **increasing the overall quota for the license hunting of wolves to 43.**²

This is the first time that hunting of wolves for population control has been authorized in this part of the country; until now, culling of wolves has been authorized for damage prevention. In the decision, the regional committee states that although wolves to be culled are most likely genetically important wolves of Finnish-Russian origin, *“in this case it is not possible to exempt genetically valuable individuals from license hunting”*. The regional committee assessed that *“There is very little possibility that these [wolves] will migrate to the Scandinavian population themselves”* and that *“Further south in Finland, individuals from the Finnish-Russian population have a significantly shorter and easier path to the Scandinavian population”*. This conclusion is not based on scientific evidence since it is proven that wolves are capable of wandering long distances. The decision, therefore, is clearly aimed at removing any wolves that happen to be in the area, in order to prevent wolves settling permanently. In addition, the regional committee seems to indicate that only genetically important wolves coming to Norway through Sweden should be protected. This is in breach of the agreement of 2011 between Sweden and Norway on the management of genetically important wolves. It is yet another step towards weakening the protection of wolves in Norway. It is also a further attempt to shift a greater part of responsibility for the South Scandinavian wolf population to Sweden.

It is also important to mention that license hunting in Sweden this winter has resulted in the culling of 5 wolf packs and reduced the South Scandinavian wolf population by another 25 wolves, in addition to wolves culled in Norway.

The most recent update on the number of wolves in Norway was issued on 5 February 2024.³ So far this winter, a total of **54-59 wolves** have been surveyed in Norway, of which **37-41 wolves only in Norway**, and 17-18 wolves shared between Norway and Sweden. Wolves killed this winter have not been discounted from this number. One wolf pack of eight animals has disappeared since it was last registered in March 2024, and poaching is considered to be the most probable cause.⁴ Altogether 4,5 (four and a half) reproducing wolf packs have been registered.⁵ Compared to winter 2023/2024, these numbers show a further reduction in the wolf population in Norway.

2. The Ministry has publicly challenged the decision of the Standing Committee

The government of Norway has not issued any public statement about the opening of a case-file on Norway’s wolf culling policy by the Standing Committee on 6 December 2024. However, the Minister of the Environment at the time, Mr. Tore O. Sandvik commented on the Standing Committee’s decision to the national broadcasting as follows: *“The government's view is that we are fulfilling our obligations under the Bern Convention. This is also the assessment of the Supreme Court. In addition, we have clear guidance from the Storting [Parliament] on how wolf management should take place.”*⁶ The Minister added that the government will further clarify the matter. So far, no clarification has been made.

The Minister has stated to other sources that the opening of a case-file against Norway at the Bern Convention has no direct consequences for Norway's wolf policy.⁷

In contrast, the Ministry issued an immediate press release on the Committee's decision on the downlisting of the protection status of the wolf in the Bern Convention, dated 5 December 2024, where it was stated that Norway still has an obligation to ensure the survival of the wolf in Norway, and to contribute to ensuring the survival of the wolf population in Scandinavia within the framework of a restrictive large carnivore policy. The Minister made the following statement:⁸

"We must investigate in more detail what significance a changed level of protection for wolves under the Bern Convention may have for Norway's management of wolves."

At the same time, the (then) Minister of Finance – Mr Trygve Slagsvold Vedum of the Centre Party, gave the following statement to media at an event organized by a local farmers' association to celebrate the downgrading of the wolf at the Bern Convention: *"This is a big victory for Norwegian communities. The wolf now has the same protection status as the shrew. Of course, we have to celebrate with a little party and cake. We get more national freedom of action and now we can remove wolves faster. This is an emotional moment, because we have heard many times that it is impossible to change the Bern Convention. Now we have made it happen."*⁹

The Parliament representative from the Liberal Party of Norway Mr Ola Elvestuen posed a written question to the Minister of Climate and the Environment on 6 January 2025 and asked for a clarification why the government did not follow up on the decision of the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention and instead authorized culling of wolves in the wolf zone. He also asked how the government plans to follow up on the Committee's decision. The Minister gave the following reply on 13 January:¹⁰

*"My view is that the current practice for regulating the population of wolves is in accordance with Norway's obligations under the Bern Convention. I refer to the fact that decisions on license hunting of wolves have been considered by the Supreme Court on two occasions, in 2021 and 2023. The legal conditions for license hunting of wolves, both outside and in the wolf zone, have been largely clarified through these judgments. The interpretation of the international law obligations under the Bern Convention was a key issue, particularly in the judgment of 2021. In both cases, the Supreme Court found, based on a thorough review and in line with international law interpretation principles, that the decisions to allow license hunting were in accordance with obligations under the Bern Convention. **In my view, neither the committee's decision itself nor the reasoning therein undermines the Supreme Court's assessments and conclusions.***

At the same time, I take seriously the fact that the Bern Convention's Standing Committee has opened a case-file regarding Norwegian wolf culling policy, and consider it of great importance to have a dialogue with the Convention's Bureau and the Standing Committee on the matter. Norway has been asked to submit the requested information and any other updates to the Convention's Bureau in February 2025. Norwegian authorities will provide such information and assessments to further describe our management and clarify our view."

(Our emphasis)

3. The government attorney questioned both the competence and conclusions of the Standing Committee at Oslo District Court

As stated above, the Ministry adopted a decision on the license hunting of 12 wolves in the wolf zone on 20 December 2024, with the planned start of the hunt on 1 January 2025. In the decision on license hunting, the Ministry has not provided any grounds for why it decided to ignore the decision of the Standing Committee, except for a general statement that the opening of a case-file does not give any grounds to change the policy on wolf culling as it has been considered by the Supreme Court to be in accordance with Norwegian law and the Bern Convention.

NOAH together with NGO Association *Our Predators* requested for a preliminary injunction at the Oslo District Court, referring to the decision of Standing Committee of the Bern Convention, and the

very low population of 6,5 breeding wolf packs registered in June 2024. The request for preliminary injunction was temporarily granted on 23 December 2024, thereby postponing the start of the license hunting until the final decision on the request for preliminary injunction was made. A court hearing on the request took place on 8 January 2025.

At the court hearing, the government attorney argued on behalf of the Ministry that the decision on the opening of a case-file does not establish that Norway is in breach of the Bern Convention, and went as far as to question both the formal and substantive competence of the Standing Committee to issue authoritative interpretations of the Convention. According to the government attorney, the Standing Committee can only give recommendations to the Contracting Parties and challenged the Committee's decision due to lack of legal analysis of the relevant Convention articles, especially the relationship of Article 2 with Article 9, based on the method of interpretation of international law, as embodied in the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties. The government attorney concluded that as the Committee's decision is not based on an authoritative legal analysis of Norway's international obligations, it has no legal significance when it comes to the wolf management in Norway.

On 20 January 2025, the Oslo District Court revoked the decision on preliminary injunction and concluded that the Ministry's decision is in accordance both with the Nature Diversity Act and the Bern Convention. The court provided the following grounds for its decision:

“The Committee has not provided any further justification for why and on what basis it believes that Norway is in breach of the Bern Convention, Art. 9. Without this being decisive, the court notes that it is somewhat unclear whether the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention has taken a final position on whether there has been a breach of the Convention. It also appears somewhat unclear whether statements/decisions from the Committee are recommendations on "best practice" or expressions of how the Convention should be correctly interpreted. The decision, according to its wording, bears the hallmark of being a call to Norway and a statement of concern related to wolf management in Norway, and can hardly be understood as an expression of state practice. The Committee does indeed point out that a norm that is based on public interests without a sufficient assessment of alternative means to wolf culling is in breach of the Bern Convention. However, there is no legal analysis of this issue, and the Supreme Court has concluded in both wolf culling judgments that the Ministry has sufficiently considered alternatives to wolf culling. The Committee is not a court and does not issue any binding decisions to Norway related to the issue of whether a national law is in conflict with the Convention or how the Nature Diversity Act should be interpreted.

In the court's view, the committee's decision to open a case-file against Norway for violation of the Bern Convention does not in itself have any place as an authoritative source of law in Norwegian law. Statements from the committee may carry arguments and analyses of the international legal sources, but as mentioned above, that is not the case here. It is a clear weakness of the Committee's decision to open a case – if the Committee intended to express how the Convention should be correctly interpreted – that it does not address the legal content of the discretionary conditions in Articles 2 and 9 of the Bern Convention. The Court leaves it open whether the assessment would be different on this point if the Committee had pointed to specific sources of law that support a specific interpretation of the wording of the aforementioned articles – sources of law that cannot be found in the Supreme Court's assessment in the wolf culling judgments or that are given different weight by the Supreme Court.

...

It is the court's view that the Supreme Court's assessment in the wolf culling judgments of 2021 and 2023 is still an expression of current law when it comes to the understanding of the Nature Diversity Act, Section 18, letter c. The opening of a case-file against Norway under the Bern Convention does not change this. In the court's view, the decision of the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention is not an expression of a legal development in this area and cannot be understood as undermining the Supreme Court's interpretation of the Nature Diversity Act and Norway's international law obligations, provided in the wolf culling judgments.”

The Complainants are very disappointed that the government has actively and publicly challenged the decision of the Standing Committee. The government has not only ignored the decision of the Standing

Committee but also created confusion about the content and meaning of the Committee's decision and the Convention's case-file system among the public.

4. The Government has continued its current wolf culling policy with no indication of intent to introduce changes or cooperate with the Complainants

After the license hunting of wolves in winter and spring 2024, only around 40 individuals were registered in Norway, bringing the number of wolves in Norway to the lowest level in the last 10 years. As of 1 June 2024, merely five wolf packs were registered in Norway and three in the border area (which means 6,5 wolf packs in Norway).¹¹ This is clearly not above the population target "with a relatively good margin" that the Supreme Court has established as a precondition to resorting to the "room for maneuver" (discretion).¹²

This year, the Ministry again authorized culling of wolves in the wolf zone despite the warning by the Norwegian Environment Agency that the wolf population could end up at the lower end of population target of 4-6 wolf packs after culling. In the Complainant's view, the Ministry has used its discretionary powers beyond what the Supreme Court has ruled to be within the limits of the law and set aside scientific data that speaks clearly against authorizing any culling of wolves in the wolf zone.¹³ The Ministry has also failed to take proper account of the high level of poaching.

The Norwegian Environment Agency pointed out in its expert assessment that it has been more challenging to gather data on territorial wolves during the last monitoring season, compared to previous years, and that the number of adult wolves disappearing between seasons is significant. Due to high inbreeding and a high level of poaching,¹⁴ the Agency recommended maintaining the population at the upper end of the population target of 4-6 wolf packs. The Agency concluded that the culling of one wolf pack on Norwegian territory and one wolf pack in the border territory would most likely cause the population to be at the lower end of the population target next season. The Agency also warned against the culling of the newly established wolf pack Risberget-Ulvåa due to the reduced likelihood of achieving the target of 3 litters in Norway next season. However, this expert assessment was set aside by the Ministry in its decision of 20 December: *"The Ministry cannot see that it is essential that the population is managed each year with the aim of keeping it in the upper range of the target, as long as the population is managed so that it is within the interval target of 4-6 annual litters. The Ministry also refers to the consideration of not overruling the decisions of the regional committees on large carnivores, where there is legal and factual scope for this."*

Regarding the territory-marking wolves in the border area of Boksjø, the Swedish authorities expressed concern over the decision to kill the wolves as there were no grazing animals in the area and the wolves were shy; however, they decided not to oppose the culling on the Norwegian side of the border. The Norwegian Environment Agency was clear in its call not to authorize the culling of border packs only on the Norwegian side as it splits up the wolf pack and may increase the risk of culling unknown (and potentially genetically valuable) individuals. They also pointed out that the female wolf in Boksjø is genetically one of the healthiest individuals in the Norwegian wolf population (F2-individual, with an inbreeding coefficient of 0,075). The Complainants consider that this fact alone should have been a ground for abstaining from culling the wolves in the border pack of Boksjø, taking into account the very precarious genetic situation of the South Scandinavian wolf population. However, the Ministry writes in the decision: *"The Ministry considers that it speaks against opening up for license hunting that the wolf is an endangered species in Scandinavia, and that the Norwegian part of the South Scandinavian population is red-listed as critically endangered. The population is relatively small and isolated with major genetic challenges. At the same time, these interests weigh less heavily due to the fact that the population target for the wolf population has been reached."*

The reasons provided in the decision for the culling of wolves on the grounds of "public interests of significant importance" are very similar and in most part identical to the ones provided in the previous years' decisions.¹⁵ The Complainants would like to point out that during the last three years the government has been crystal clear about the aim of culling entire wolf packs – that is to actively curb

population growth and to keep the population down within the population target, at a critically endangered level. The government attorney argued in the court on behalf of the Ministry that the annual culling of wolves in the wolf zone is important to have control over the growth of the population and that keeping the population down at the politically agreed 4-6 annual reproductions (litters) of wolves is necessary to ensure predictability and trust in the wolf management. He stated that the wolf (management) zone is not meant to provide strict protection to wolves but is merely a management tool for achieving the politically agreed population target. Thus, the government has openly admitted that Norway does not provide any strict protection to wolves on any part of its territory and is only guided by the political aim of maintaining a small fraction of 40-60 wolves of the Scandinavian wolf population on its territory.

When it comes to the requirement of finding other satisfactory solutions, the decision establishes that although non-lethal measures can have some effect, culling is necessary in the wolf zone as there are still negative effects *“related to conflict and reduced trust if the wolf population is above the population target”*. In this regard, the Ministry provides no further explanation and simply refers to the judgment by the Supreme Court where the court stated: *“If it is assumed that culling will strengthen trust in large carnivore management and increase predictability for people [outside the wolf zone], it is not easy to see how this can be achieved in any other satisfactory way.”* The condition of “there is no other satisfactory solution” is therefore considered to be fulfilled by a mere assumption, and no real and concrete (case-by-case) consideration of this condition is undertaken.

The Ministry has not contacted the Complainants to discuss the decision of the Standing Committee nor given any indication of intentions to change the course in the current wolf culling policy. The amended Regulation on Prevention and Conflict Mitigation Measures, mentioned in our previous report, came into force on 1 January 2025, and unfortunately did not take on board any of the proposals by NOAH to include information and communication measures as essential means to achieve the aims of the Regulation, in line with target 4 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to “effectively manage human-wildlife interactions to minimize human-wildlife conflict for coexistence”.

Conclusion

In the Complainants’ view, Norway continues to be in breach of Articles 2, 4, 6 and 9 of the Bern Convention by conducting a wolf culling policy where the wolf is kept out of 95% of Norway’s land territory, on the grounds of Article 9(1) indent b and indent c (“overriding public interests”) and kept at a low level of 4-6 reproductive wolf packs, on the grounds of Article 9(1) indent c. It is a policy where the wolf is presented as an unwanted species and subjected to heavy culling, resulting in the killing of up to 30% of wolves in Norway every year. The Complainants view the government’s reluctance to consider any changes to its wolf culling policy as a sign of disrespect towards legally binding international agreements on nature conservation and shows that the Norwegian government has taken the approach of cherry-picking when it comes to the Bern Convention, i.e. following up on its obligations in relation to certain species, but disregarding them in relation to others, such as the wolf, in order to continue its “restrictive” management policy.

Yours Sincerely,

Siri Martinsen
CEO

NOAH – for animal rights

Ragnhild Sollund
Professor in criminology

University of Oslo

Stefanie Reinhardt
Asst. Professor in
ecology

University of
South-Eastern Norway

Margareth Konst

¹ The quota for the culling of 27 wolves outside the wolf zone was approved by the Ministry of Climate and the Environment on 28 November 2024.

² This decision on the license hunting of 4 wolves has been disputed by NOAH; the final decision by the Ministry is pending.

³ <https://roydata.no/Nyheter/ArtMID/17026/ArticleID/6730/54-59-ulver-pavist-i-Norge-hitil-i-vinter.aspx>

⁴ <https://www.nrk.no/innlandet/ulvene-i-norges-eldste-ulverevir-er-forsvunnet-1.17268933>, 13 February 2025.

⁵ This means that 3 wolf packs have their territory only in Norway, and 3 wolf packs straddle between the border of Norway and Sweden. According to established practice and national regulation, a wolf pack whose territory is partially located in Sweden, shall be counted with a factor of 0,5 in Norway.

⁶ <https://www.nrk.no/innlandet/bernkonsvensjonen-opnar-sak-mot-norsk-ulvepolitikk-1.17158020>, 6 December 2024.

⁷ <https://www.rovdyr.org/aktuelt/miljostatsraden-det-at-det-er-apnet-sak-mot-norge-far-ingen-direkte-konsekvenser-for-norsk-ulvepolitikk/>, 8 December 2024.

⁸ <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/ulvens-beskyttelsesniva-i-europa-er-vedtatt-endret/id3077914/>, 5 December 2024.

⁹ <https://www.nrk.no/innlandet/ulvemotstandarar-jublar-etter-endring-i-bernkonsvensjonen--inviterte-til-spontanfeiring-i-osterdalen-1.17153003>, 3 December 2024.

¹⁰ <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Sporsmal/Skriftlige-sporsmal-og-svar/Skriftlig-sporsmal/?qnid=100001>

¹¹ In management terms (see supra n. 4), 6,5 litters were registered. Wolves who have died in the same period are not deducted from the population figures and shall be deducted in the next year's report.

¹² The Ministry has set aside this legal precondition by stating in the decision: *"In the Ministry's view, it is of no significant importance for this assessment that the population is now only 0,5 above the population target and the target has not been "reached (...) by a relatively good margin", cf. HR-2023-936-A section 47. The Ministry refers to what is said in section 4.5.1 about the need for license hunting to keep the population as close to the population target as possible."*

¹³ In the expert assessment of 4 November 2024, the Norwegian Environment Agency stated that due to the culling of wolves in three wolf territories last year, the room for maneuver to authorize culling this year is consequently reduced compared to previous year.

¹⁴ The state-sanctioned license hunting can have the effect of legitimizing illegal hunting of wolves, called "facilitated poaching" (see Santiago-Ávila, F. J., Chappell, R. J., & Treves, A. (2020). Liberalizing the killing of endangered wolves was associated with more disappearances of collared individuals in Wisconsin, USA. *Scientific reports*, 10(1), 1-14). In January 2024, the *National Authority for Investigation and Prosecution of Economic and Environmental Crime* detained six hunters as suspects in poaching of wolves; two of detainees have previously engaged in license hunting of wolves. However, this effect has not been considered by the Ministry.

¹⁵ As pointed out by the Ministry, this year's decision was the sixth in a row of decisions authorizing culling of wolves in established wolf territories based on "public interests of significant importance", and the fifth authorizing culling of wolves in the wolf zone on the same basis.