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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

41st meeting
Strasbourg, 29 November - 3 December 2021

Extraordinary Meeting of the Bureau

28 June 2021
(virtual meeting)

- MEETING REPORT -

*Report prepared by
the Directorate of Democratic Participation*

1. OPENING OF THE MEETING

The Chair of the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention, Ms Jana Durkošová, opened the extraordinary meeting of the Bureau to the Bern Convention, taking place again online due to the ongoing pandemic travel and meeting restrictions. She welcomed all Bureau members and thanked the Secretariat for preparing the meeting and the documents.

Decision: The meeting agenda was adopted with no amendments (appendix 1).

2. CASE-FILE VIRTUAL ADVISORY MISSIONS: UPDATE

The Secretariat informed the Bureau on the state of play of the four on-the-spot-appraisals (OSA) which had been mandated by the Standing Committee at its 40th meeting in the framework of the following files: Open File no. 2001/04: Building “Struma Motorway” through the Kresna Gorge (Bulgaria), Open File no. 2013/1: Hydro power development within the territory of Mavrovo National Park (North Macedonia), complaint on stand-by no. 2018/01: Presumed threat to Emerald site “Polonina Borzhava” from wind energy development (Ukraine) and complaint on stand-by no. 2017/6: Possible negative impact on Breiðafjörður Nature Reserve’s authentic birch woods from new road infrastructure (Iceland).

The Secretariat pointed out that it was proving challenging to implement all four OSAs and have the resulting documents finalised in time for the 41st Standing Committee, in particular with a view to finding an agreement on the Terms of Reference (ToR), identifying competent and available experts, coping with the business summer slowdown and meeting internal deadlines for translation and publication of the documents.

The Secretariat informed that the OSA in the framework of the case on Mavrovo National Park had taken place virtually in spring and was progressing well.

In the case of the OSA in the framework of the Kresna Gorge case, the ToR had been agreed by both parties and two experts selected. The Secretariat was now awaiting a proposal from the national authorities for possible dates to hold the OSA, envisaged for end of August/beginning of September. The Secretariat further informed that the project through which the European Commission services were supporting the Bulgarian authorities in setting up site specific conservation measures for the two Natura 2000 sites in the Kresna Gorge was still on-going and had not been finalised, as originally foreseen, in March. It was likely to run for a few more months.

With regard to the OSA in the framework of the case on the Emerald Site “Polonina Borzhava”, the ToR had been agreed by both parties. The Secretariat was now awaiting the agreement of the national authorities to the two proposed experts as well as a proposal for possible dates to hold the OSA. The Secretariat pointed out that it was unlikely that the OSA could take place before end of September/early October, and that this could lead to a possible delay for having documents finalised in time for the 41st Standing Committee meeting.

What concerned the OSA in the framework of the case on Breiðafjörður Nature Reserve, the Secretariat informed that the previous Focal Points from the Icelandic Institute of Natural History had recently resigned as contacts to the Bern Convention. The Icelandic Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources had now taken over the respective roles and would work in close contact with the Icelandic Institute of Natural History on matters regarding the Bern Convention. Due to these recent staff changes, the new Focal Point had indicated to the Secretariat that no response could be given to the draft ToR nor to possible dates for an OSA until after the summer break. The Secretariat pointed out to the Bureau that it was therefore unlikely that the OSA and resulting documents could be ready in time for the 41st Standing Committee.

Decision: The Bureau noted the challenge it represented to organise four OSAs in a year and thanked the Secretariat for its efforts under non-standard conditions.

It further stressed the importance of Contracting Parties being responsive to questions and deadlines set by the Secretariat for the organisation of an OSA.

The Bureau also noted the change of Focal Point for Iceland and expressed its appreciation for the commitment of the Icelandic Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources to conservation actions of the Convention. The Bureau underlined the importance of the Pan-European Emerald Network and the OSA planned for Iceland. It hoped that the OSA could still go ahead this year.

The Bureau instructed the Secretariat to continue with the organisation of the remaining three OSAs until the end of the year even if resulting documents could possibly not be finalised in time for the 41st Standing Committee meeting. It suggested that a draft document could be submitted to the Standing Committee and an online consultation could be considered in order not to postpone the Standing Committee decision until December 2022.

3. CASE-FILE REFLECTION: PRESENTATION OF THE SECRETARIAT MEMORANDUM AND OPEN DISCUSSION

The Secretariat presented the internal working document (Secretariat Memorandum) on a reflection and possible improvements for the case-file system, recalling that at the last Bureau meeting in April, the need for such an initiative had been explained: the overload of case-files for the Secretariat, Bureau and Standing Committee to deal with, the challenging processes, and the relevant timing alongside the vision and financing working groups, and general growing environmental awareness.

The Bureau thanked the Secretariat for having prepared the memorandum and suggested that for today's meeting, an open discussion, brainstorming, and general support (or otherwise) of specific proposals would be preferred, after which the memorandum should be circulated for written consultation amongst the Bureau members and follow-up discussion and decision at the September Bureau meeting.

The Bureau discussed the various issues and proposals under the eight sub-topics of the memorandum. The general feeling was that this reflection was strongly needed, and there was support for proposals which could reduce the burden on the Secretariat and Bureau without compromising the integrity of the system. It was also mentioned that a future strengthening of the mandate of the Bureau may be required, to deal with all of these cases in a timely and effective manner.

The majority of the proposals were supported by the Bureau, while some received a counter-proposal or modification. The Bureau gave the green light to the Secretariat to move forward with some minor administrative updates, but for the more substantial changes, further reflection would be required, and a possible Standing Committee decision needed.

Decision: The Bureau thanked the Secretariat for the memorandum on the case-file system reflection and possible improvements, in general supported it, and requested that the document be circulated amongst the Bureau members for a written consultation ahead of the September Bureau meeting. At that meeting, further decisions could be made, and it could be decided to transform the document into a concise set of guidelines or another shorter format for the Standing Committee's endorsement. It could also be envisaged to consult such a document with the Bureau by written consultation ahead of the Standing Committee meeting.

4. FINANCING AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE BERN CONVENTION: UPDATES

The Secretariat gave a brief report on the 3rd online meeting of the Inter-Sessional Working Group on Finances (15 June 2021), as well as on the 2nd online meeting of the Working Group on developing a Vision and Strategic Plan for the Bern Convention (21 June 2021). The Secretariat highlighted the challenging tight time frame for completing the task of drafting a Vision and Strategic Plan for the 41st Standing Committee. It was also pointed out that the role of the Bern Convention had been recognised recently during a meeting of the expert group for EU nature directives regarding criteria and guidance for protected areas designation.

The Secretariat further informed on the state of play of voluntary contributions received to date for 2021. Approximately € 92 000 had been credited so far to the Special Account. A reminder had been

sent out on behalf of the Chair to Contracting Parties end of May to recall the necessity of the voluntary contributions to guarantee the proper functioning of the Secretariat and implementation of the programme of activities.

Decision: The Bureau took note of the information provided and thanked the Inter-Sessional Working Group on Finances for its work. It also thanked the Working Group on developing a Vision and Strategic Plan for its work, taking note of the tight timeframe for completing the tasks. It welcomed the recognition by the EU of the Bern Convention's role within the EU technical document on criteria for protected areas.

The Bureau thanked the Contracting Parties which had made voluntary contributions to this point and urged all other Parties to commit to a necessary funding for the Convention in order to ensure its continued functioning.

5. 41ST STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING: FORMAT OF MEETING

The Secretariat informed that due to the ongoing pandemic, travel and meeting restrictions, video-conferences were still the preferred option in the Council of Europe at least until the end of the year. While a final decision on the format of the 41st Standing Committee meeting would need to be taken during the Bureau meeting in September, for now it was important to envisage and prepare for the different scenarios. The possibilities were to hold a physical meeting in Strasbourg, or to organise it virtually, as done last year, with the possible physical presence of the Chair and Vice-Chair.

Decision: The Bureau instructed the Secretariat to anticipate and plan for the various scenarios for holding the 41st Standing Committee, with a final decision to be taken during the September Bureau meeting.

6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

It was recalled that the next Bureau meeting would be held virtually on 15-16 September 2021.

Appendix I - Agenda

- 1. OPENING OF THE MEETING AND ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA**
- 2. CASE-FILE VIRTUAL ADVISORY MISSIONS: UPDATE**
- 3. CASE-FILE REFLECTION: PRESENTATION OF THE SECRETARIAT MEMORANDUM AND OPEN DISCUSSION**
- 4. FINANCING AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE BERN CONVENTION: UPDATES**
- 5. 41ST STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING: FORMAT OF MEETING**
- 6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Appendix II – List of participants

CHAIR

Ms Jana DURKOŠOVÁ, Senior State Advisor, Division for Nature and Landscape Protection, Ministry of the Environment, Slovak Republic

VICE-CHAIR

Ms Merike LINNAMÄGI, Senior officer, Nature Conservation Department, Ministry of the Environment, Estonia

BUREAU MEMBERS

Mr Carl AMIRGULASHVILI, Head of Biodiversity and Forestry Policy Department, Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture, Georgia

Mr Jan PLESNIK, Adviser to Director in foreign affairs, Nature Conservation Agency (NCA CR), Czech Republic

Mr Øystein STØRKERSEN, Principal Advisor, Norwegian Environment Agency, Norway

SECRETARIAT

Council of Europe / Directorate of Democratic Participation F-67075 STRASBOURG CEDEX, France

Ms Ursula STICKER, Secretary of the Bern Convention

Mr Marc HORY, Bern Convention Project Manager

Ms Nadia SAPORITO, Bern Convention Junior Project Officer

Mr Eoghan KELLY, Bern Convention Project Assistant