

TSZA VOICES: Shared watershed, common action

Five JOINTISZA partners' representatives, one from each country of the Tisza River Basin, shared their thoughts during the project kick-off event on the importance of cooperation and on how to achieve the best results.

Anemari Ciurea / National Administration 'Romanian "Waters" / International Relations



Q: Describe some of the physical characteristics of the Tisza River in Romania.

Anemari Ciurea: Romania is an upstream country and accounts for 46 percent of the Tisza River basin—in terms of catchment. This has to be understood in terms of data collection, data handling and data management. So, Romania is handling about half of all data for the whole basin. There are a lot of transboundary rivers, so in Romania the Tisza basin is a small part of the river on the border with Ukraine, but there are lots of tributaries in Romania that join the Tisza in Hungary. Therefore, Romania and Hungary share an active hydro-technical commission dealing with flood management, drought management, water quality management for all these rivers crossing the border. Of course, as an upstream country, Romania is very much aware of the importance of the JOINTISZA project because a lot of other work depends on the quality of work and data from upstream. On the other hand, it's a very challenging flagship project because it integrates the requirements of two important directives of the European Union. One directive requires a river basin management plan, and the other requires a flood-risk plan.

Q: Where does the JOINTISZA project come in?

What the JOINTISZA project is doing is combining the river basin management plan with those elements of the flood risk plan that have transboundary effects. It is a pilot for the whole Danube, and then we can see what the project results are and how we can use them. It builds on previous and existing aspects of transboundary cooperation. And we'll see how to integrate the bilateral agreement and regulation with the implementation of this directive in a transboundary context.

Q: Please describe some of the details of your group's work package within the JOINTISZA project.

The project will include a pilot that will be developed between Romania and Hungary. The scope of the project is to see what is happening in the downstream country (Hungary) if a dike close to the border is broken in the upstream country (Romania). We will put together the experts who will run modelling, and we have to identify what needs to be addressed separately or in common. What we know now is where we'll do the pilot project and the modelling, which is somewhere in the north of the Tisza.

Balázs Horváth / Head of the International Department at the General Directorate of Water Management of Hungary (OVF)

Q: What is the significance of the Tisza River basin from a Hungarian perspective? And what are the related challenges?

Balázs Horváth: About 95 percent of surface waters in Hungary come from abroad, which means that it's crucial to have a common plan with countries in the basin to ensure sufficient water quantity and water quality. We also need a system of shared methodologies and common measures to be protected against floods and droughts, both before they happen and when they occur. For example, the Tisza River, while much smaller than the Danube, can produce flood events that bring huge differences in water levels—even as much as 10 metres—which are quite difficult to deal with.

Q: What are the most important ways that the JOINTISZA project builds on existing levels of transboundary cooperation?

A: Five countries share the Tisza River basin, and they have established cooperation already in the past. A plan was already drawn up for the Tisza River Basin in 2009, but work on the measures taken at the time were quite limited so we need enhanced levels of cooperation. What's really needed now, and the purpose of this project, is to update the river basin management plan. The processes are in place, but we need new data, and we hope that the current cooperation will result later in a smooth, integrated implementation.

Q: What are some of the biggest challenges of getting five countries to work together, and of being the lead partner in the project?

One of the main challenges has to do with the different geographical positions of the countries along the course of the river. The Tisza flows from three countries before it enters Hungary, after which it flows into Serbia. But there's also the positioning of the countries regarding the EU. Slovakia, Romania and Hungary are member states, and Serbia is a candidate country for membership, while Ukraine still has quite some way to go. What this means in terms of basin management is that there are different techniques and methodologies in terms of monitoring, data collection and analysis, which in turn affects data availability. A harmonised plan would help to narrow these kinds of differences.

But our key aim for the Tisza basin is to develop transboundary measures, and the real added value of the JOINTISZA project will be when all the countries involved can agree on these measures.





Branislava Matic / Jaroslav Cerni Institute for the Development of Water Resources

Q: What are some of characteristics of the Tisza River in Serbia?

Branislava Matic: Serbia is the most downstream country in the Tisza River basin, so for us this type of cooperation is important because all the adverse effects from upstream countries, such as pollution, overuse, et cetera, affect our water management at the national level. It's also important to underline that two main Danube tributaries, the Sava and the Tisza rivers, have their confluences with the Danube in Serbia.

Q: What is the main role of your working group in this project?

The Jaroslavl Cerni Institute is the lead institution for Work Package 4, which will address water quantity and groundwater status within the Tisza River basin. Within this WP we plan to collect different data and information on quantity and quality and to assess ground water bodies status and water demand for different users within the river basin—for irrigation, water supply and hydropower.

During the first planning period we had an assessment of the present situation and it's really visible based on data provided by the Tisza countries that things need to be addressed very carefully because there are interlinkages between water quantity and quality within the basin.

Q: As the project is based on previous levels of cooperation that have gone on for some time, what are some of the new features of this project?

First of all, we will have two pilots from the water quantity perspective. One concerns urban hydrology, which is quite a significant issue all around the world. And by "urbanisation" I'm not just talking just about big cities—we're talking about changes in land use practices. There are also climate change and water quantity issues within some other work packages. This is the improvement. It's not going to be just a river basin management plan document. We'll be able to provide different perspectives and other points of view. We will also use, as much as possible, the Danube GIS database, which is managed by the ICPDR, since the majority of partners are in some way involved in their activity. So, we will have uniform data templates and reporting.



Jarmila Makovinska / Water Research Institute / Slovak National Water Reference Laboratory

Q: Describe the geographical characteristics of the Tisza River Basin in your home country of Slovakia.

Jarmila Makovinska: The Tisza River itself flows in Slovakia for only 5.2 kilometres, but almost all rivers and streams of the eastern part of the country is a catchment area for flows into the Tisza, but which are downstream of the Tisza on Hungarian territory.

Some of our Tisza tributaries, especially the Uh, are very much influenced by oil pollution coming from Ukraine. But Slovakia's lowland agricultural production also generates nutrient pollution—also pollution from pesticides. Organic pollution has been another problem, but things are better now since the construction of several wastewater treatment plants, which began in 2000-2002 when European funds became available for such investments.

Q: What are Slovakia's responsibilities as a work package leader in the JOINTISZA project?

We are heading Work Package 3, which focuses on Tisza River Basin characterisation, status assessment, pressure analysis and assessment of objectives and exemptions. The last part focuses on significant water management issues. Another part of our activity is preparing a survey manual for potential and future surveys of the Tisza River.

Q: What are some of the positive outcomes that you expect from this project?

I think it's very important to focus on the management plan, which will fill a lot of gaps. The first Tisza management plan was done in 2010 or 2011, and it needs to be updated. If the management plan will establish and implement the programme of measures it could have positive effects on the aquatic environment, which is a main goal. As Danube partner countries, many of us have been working together for some time, and there are quite a few working groups under the roof of the ICPDR. Most of the people at this kick-off meeting are members of one of these groups. We expect that this longstanding cooperation will continue during this project.

Olena Marushevskaya / Blue Rivers Environmental Consulting



Q: The Tisza River originates in Ukraine. What are some of the important characteristics of the Ukrainian section of the river and basin area?

Olena Marushevskaya: The Tisza River Basin in Ukraine is unique because the administrative border of the basin is the same as the river basin borders, which creates an ideal platform for framework implementation.

In terms of the main problems to address for the entire basin, the main pressures come from organic pollution and nutrient pollution. But one of Ukraine's biggest challenges is insufficiently treated wastewater because we lack water treatment capacity to meet European standards. Also, there's also the issue of litter—especially plastic bottles that moves from mountain areas to the lowlands. In the higher areas, there are almost no collection facilities for municipal waste, and unfortunately rivers sometimes act as corridors for waste removal.

Q: How did you get involved with the JOINTISZA project?

I got involved with the Tisza Basin quite a long time ago because of my involvement in the ICPDR Expert group on public participation on behalf of Ukraine. So, this is a continuation of what was done before. Our team was involved in the development of the first Tisza River Basin Management Plan with other Tisza countries. We really hope that the second plan will be much better and more comprehensive from our side.

Compared to a few years ago, the big difference now for Ukraine is that the development of river basin management plans is included in the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union. So, now we are legally bound to develop river basin management plans, and are also responsible for their implementation.

Q: So, these new conditions offer good basis for improving on previous agreements?

Yes. It shows that all the state authorities will be empowered to implement the recommendations of the plan, and also that the national monitoring system will be changed to reflect the needs of the management plan. But what is so exciting is that the Tisza Basin can be a pilot area for Ukraine in terms of how to do things, and then we can replicate it for other basins. That's why this project is important. And of course, we'll get hand-in-hand experience with other countries on how to really do things.

Q: Related to that, how important are project like this in terms of opening up or re-establishing levels of communication at a transboundary level?

We already have good and long-lasting cooperation between Tisza countries, so this isn't really a new thing. Rather, it builds on long-term cooperation. But again, what is new is that we hope to be an integral part of the process, not merely an external member — i.e. outside the EU — of the Tisza Basin with limited capacities — but to really contribute and be able to share in responsibilities.

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