

## **Recommendations**

# **on funding interventions for promoting green infrastructure from EU to regional, national and local level**

**developed within the SaveGREEN project –  
„Safeguarding the functionality of transnationally  
important ecological corridors in the Danube basin”  
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## **Abbreviations:**

**EIA – Environmental Impact Assessment**

**SEA – Strategic Impact Assessment**

**EC – Ecological Corridors**

**GI – Green Infrastructure**

**ERDF – European Regional Development Fund**

**ETC– European Territorial Cooperation**

**CF – Cohesion Fund**

**ESF - European Social Fund**

**EMFF – European Maritime and Fisheries Fund**

**CAP funds – Common Agriculture Policy funds**

**TA - Technical Assistance**

**GAEC – Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions**

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## 1. Scope and applied methodology

### 1.1 Scope

In the framework of the project SaveGREEN “*Safeguarding the functionality of transnationally important ecological corridors in the Danube basin*”, Project Number: DTP3-314-2.3, Contract beneficiary: WWF Romania, Highclere Consulting was contracted for the elaboration of a Green Infrastructure (GI) funding measure and/ or proposals for GI funding interventions at transnational level, with input from project experts. These are subsequently to be adapted to and used in the national advocacy work aimed at influencing the integration of such measures in relevant funding programmes in Partners’ countries.

### 1.2 Methodology

The proposed interventions have been elaborated based on the needs identified by 51 experts and decisional staff, with expertise in environmental protection and the management and implementation of EU funds, in response to a questionnaire developed by the authors of this report. The proposals were further cross-checked with the EU legislation framework for funding programmes for their relevance according to this framework and adjusted to properly respond to the needs and scope of the Project.

As the questionnaire analysis revealed, **there is a need for a set of measures/ interventions rather than a single measure.**

For this reason, the proposals featured below have been split into two general categories, the first addressing the programmes mechanism - general provisions part of the logical framework common to all EU funding programmes (e.g. the chapters for analysis, provisions for monitoring and evaluation, the technical assistance component etc.), the second, offering suggestions for specific measures/ interventions, within the main EU funds (covering CAP and Cohesion Policy).

In the case of Ukraine, a separate proposal was elaborated as it is not part of the EU

Budget estimates and a quantification of indicators have not been included, as such estimates would require more detailed assessments for each country, going beyond the scope of this report.

Furthermore, as this report is to be a purely technical document, the specific political context and priorities in each of the featured countries were not included in the assessment.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations for developing and adapting the measures/ interventions identified in the preceding sections to the national context and for how to promote the measures/ interventions at the country and local level.

## **2. Proposals at Programme level - applicable to all EU funded programmes/ plans/ strategies**

### **2.1 Analysis – including SWOT**

The analysis (the description of the situation and the SWOT – “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats” Analysis) is an essential section of any funding programme, as it provides the basis for any intervention.

The following information should be included in the analysis chapters of the Programmes in order to ensure appropriate interventions:

- A description of the ecological connectivity and migration corridors/ landscape fragmentation in the intervention area;
- Territorial focus areas (e.g. mountain areas, Danube flooded areas);
- A presentation of the available data (maps of core areas, migration corridors, etc.) as well as a description of what data is lacking;
- Arguments supporting the need of public awareness;
- A description of the threats related to non-intervention.

As the analysis is formulated in response to specific objectives defined in existing EU regulations, the recommendations should target the appropriate sub-chapter therein (e.g. for CAP funds the relevant specific objectives is: *“contribute to the protection of biodiversity, enhance ecosystem services and preserve habitats and landscapes”*).

## **2.2 SEA**

Each EU funded programme/ strategy has to undergo a SEA process during its early stages. Consequently, each such SEA should include mandatory provisions for the assessment of the programmes' impact on ecological corridors / habitats and landscape connectivity, and include specific mitigation and compensation provisions, thus supporting the streamlining of GI across Programmes under assessment.

## **2.3 Common proposals to several interventions**

EU funded Programmes usually include such a chapter (as required by the EU funding regulations). This chapter should include:

- A mandatory provision that all EIA processes launched for projects funded by the programme cover the issue of linear or spatial barriers to ecological corridors/ habitats and landscape connectivity created by large investments, such as motorways, railways, tourist infrastructure, land consolidation etc.;
- A mandatory provision requiring all project designs to consider the potential benefits that a deployment of GI may represent for the viability of ecological corridors/ habitats and landscape connectivity.

## **2.4 Monitoring and Evaluation**

The monitoring and evaluation framework is provided by the European Commission and includes context, output, result and impact indicators. However, these indicators are not formulated in sufficient detail to be of relevance for ecological corridors/ landscape fragmentation and general environmental connectivity issues, despite the fact that indicators for biodiversity do exist.

As additional indicators can be included, the recommendations are:

- Setting-up specific indicators for monitoring, such as: number of interventions for assuring habitat and landscape connectivity, or for reducing wild animal mortality and injuries on EU-financed roads/ railways;
- Use of the (Programmes') evaluation to assess the effects of the financed investments on the habitat and landscape connectivity, thus identifying the need for GI.

## **2.5 Technical Assistance**

This fund should finance:

- Awareness campaigns for promoting GI at both national and local level – covering the areas in which the Programme will be implemented and with a focus on core areas for ecological corridors.
- Studies for the identification of ecological corridors and especially of threatened habitats / small populations of wild animals that are more prone to disturbances by investments that may act as barriers.
- Consultancy services/studies on the impact of existing investments that may act as linear or spatial barriers, permeability assessments of the corridors, identification of bottleneck situations based on structural connectivity, etc.

## **3. Proposals at measure / intervention level**

### **3.1 For CAP funds**

At the level of:

### 3.1.1 Baseline for area related payments

- Strengthening the GAEC 9 standards: “*Minimum share of agricultural area devoted to non-productive features or areas*” and “*Retention of landscape features*”. GAEC 9 remains to be detailed by Member States, under the obligations for the system of “conditionality” (the requirements any beneficiary of area-based payments has to comply with).

Thus, this GAEC has the potential of having a large impact on preserving the landscape and habitat elements vital to connectivity, especially in areas prone to agricultural intensification, monocultures, drainage and intensive irrigation.

### 3.1.2 Eco-schemes

- Introducing eco-schemes for incentivising the provision of public goods by agricultural practices beneficial to the landscape: Eco-schemes are voluntary for farmers and their provisions must go beyond the defined system of conditionality. Despite the fact that the concept of eco-schemes is at its beginning, it appears clear that farm incentives could be used to tackle mono-cultures / promote crop diversification and reduction in the use of pesticides and fertilisers, thus sustaining biodiversity.

### 3.1.3 Agri-environment

- Support for extensive management of grasslands: As the semi-natural grasslands, already receiving support under agri-environment schemes, are mostly High Natural Value, maintaining them under extensive management supports the conservation of ecological corridors; Preservation / maintenance of permanent grasslands plays an important role for the conservation of many species at landscape level.



- Ecological restoration of wetlands: This scheme, though a bit more complex as it involves a change of the land use, has a strong positive influence on wildlife migration along water courses.
- Support for agro-forestry: An attractive support level and an enlargement of the territory benefiting of agro-forestry systems should significantly contribute to the preservation and possible expansion of ecological corridors.

### **3.1.4 Non-productive investments**

- Support for avoiding conflicts with large carnivores and herbivores: Despite non-productive investments being largely associated with fences, which can represent further barriers to migration, these investments, if deployed correctly, can ensure a balance between farming activities and wildlife, reducing human-wildlife conflicts.

Fences and planted hedges could play a positive role for large carnivores/herbivores if their design protects the farmers' livestock and separates them from wild habitats thus reducing the chances for human-wildlife conflict and alleviated the anthropogenic pressure on animal migration routes.

### **3.1.5 Afforestation of agricultural land**

- Promoting afforestation: As this intervention may support a selection system, there should be a prioritisation of this type of investments through the selection system for the agricultural land acting as ecological corridors for large carnivores, in areas with evidence of conflicts between farmers and carnivores, as well for other types of fauna that may benefit from afforestation (with native species).

### 3.1.5 AKIS

AKIS - Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation systems may and should play an important role in increasing farmers' awareness of their role in preserving biodiversity/ avoiding habitat fragmentation. Farmers' discussion groups should be set-up in core areas that are known for being important for wildlife migration.

### 3.2 For Cohesion Policy funds (CF and EFRD)

The Cohesion Fund<sup>1</sup> and ERDF provide the opportunity for financing investments in transport infrastructure, with the Cohesion Fund concentrating more on the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), while the focus of the ERDF lies on lower category roads. Under Policy Objective 3 of Cohesion Policy "A more connected Europe by enhancing mobility and regional ICT connectivity", Member States may finance transport infrastructure investments under 2 specific objectives, respectively:

*"ii) developing a sustainable, climate resilient, intelligent, secure and intermodal TEN-T".*

*"iii) developing sustainable, climate resilient, intelligent and intermodal national, regional and local mobility, including improved access to TEN-T and cross-border mobility".*

There is widespread evidence that transport infrastructure has a strong negative impact on wildlife and ecosystems, posing an important barrier for the natural movement and migration of wildlife species and representing a major driver of biodiversity loss. The most frequent negative impacts of transport infrastructure investments are related to habitat loss, the isolation of populations, barrier effects and fragmentation of nature networks or road mortality of wildlife species.

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<sup>1</sup> The Cohesion Fund shall support those Member States whose GNI *per capita*, measured in PPS and calculated on the basis of Union figures for the period 2014-2016, is less than 90 % of the average GNI *per capita* of the EU-27 for the same reference period. Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania are benefiting from Cohesion Fund for the period 2021-2027.

In this context, there is a need to integrate GI into the transport infrastructure investments in order to minimise the fragmentation of ecosystems, preserve habitats and reduce noise levels. “Biodiversity proofing” should thus be considered when financing transport infrastructure investments in order to minimise the negative consequences by planning and implementing actions, which could facilitate safe crossings of roads/railways by wildlife prior to construction, or upgrading existing transport infrastructure:

- Wildlife crossings (tunnels, viaducts or green bridges, culverts, green roofs, underpasses, overpasses, landscape bridges etc.) for new or existing infrastructure – as both stand-alone investments (e.g. green bridges for existing motorways) and investments within a larger project.
- Other related investments (for new or existing infrastructure): transport infrastructure verge management, creating of natural guiding vegetation, installation of road signs, etc. could maximize the functionality of green infrastructure through effective management of the neighbouring land.

As these investments may be seen as an extra burden, the selection system should prioritise investments with the above components.

Reserving a dedicated budget for GI could be a solution, however, this proposal may face reluctance from managing authorities, as it may lead to blocked funds, if projects are not planned in an integrated manner (transport-biodiversity) from an early stage.

Apart from these “hard” investments in GI, the cohesion policy funds may and should finance (either within the technical assistance priority or within the thematic priority) “soft” measures and activities in order to support addressing the knowledge gap regarding ecological corridors: educational actions, public awareness, capacity building and trainings related to green infrastructure.

### **3.3 For spatial planning**

Of course, EU funds are a strong driving force, especially in Central and Eastern Europe and each country has the duty to do its best in using this budget for sustainable development.

Nevertheless, the implementation of EU funds relies on the national regulatory framework on spatial planning. Integrating the issues of ecological corridors/ wildlife migration/ GI restoration/ habitats fragmentation into the spatial planning policy and legal framework (as the Czech Republic has done) may therefore play a long-term role and have a wider positive impact. Furthermore, well-formulated spatial planning policies have the advantage of preserving the ecological corridors prone to land-use changes beyond the direct sphere of influence of EU funds, such as the existent greenways and greenbelts near cities.

### **3.4 Specific recommendations for Ukraine**

Being a non-EU Member State nor a candidate country, Ukraine has a different institutional set-up. Nevertheless, Ukraine is a priority partner for the EU, having signed the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (AA) in 2014, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Under the main goal of supporting administrative reforms, EU funds were made available mainly through the European Neighbourhood Policy (more than 200 million Euro) and Enlargement policies (European Neighbourhood Instrument – Eastern Partnership) and provided by the European Investment Bank (13 billion Euro as loans and 2 billion Euro as grants).

Under the main priorities such as rule of law, democracy, and decentralisation, Ukraine also has access to Twinning and TAIEX (state-to-state consultancy) instruments meant to build institutional capacity for all areas under EU prerogatives.

Thus, the recommendations are:

a) To make the best use of the foreseen public consultations on how to use the 2021 - 2027 EU funds, in the context of the announced funding mechanism for the Eastern Partnership<sup>2</sup>.

This funding mechanism will include investments outlined in the TEN-T network, thus upgrading key physical infrastructure in road, rail, port, inland waterway and airport facilities, and logistics centres in order to further strengthen connectivity between Ukraine and the EU. On the other hand, as the EU seeks more ambitious environmental goals (and already proposed the following environmental objective for the Eastern Partnership: “together towards environmental and climate resilience”), this creates a good opportunity for promoting the following priorities through the public consultation processes and by participation in working groups:

- Setting-up a monitoring and evaluation framework that includes specific output and result indicators for ecological corridors that should be linked with investment needs for GI.
- A provision that all the technical designs for the funded investments should consider the required GI.
- Mandatory advantage through the scoring system for projects that take GI into account.
- A provision that all the investments conduct an EIA that includes an assessment of the possible impact of the projects on ecological corridors.
- Wildlife crossings (tunnels, viaducts or green bridges, culverts, green roofs etc.) for new or existing infrastructure.

b) To encourage institutional capacity building projects through Twinning and TAIEX, to further strengthen the local institutions (e.g. for the State Environmental Inspectorates) on their path in transposing and applying the EU directives on SEA and EIA, thus creating the basis for ensuring programmes/ plans/ strategies and projects will properly consider threats to biodiversity and, specifically, the role of GI.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/act\\_part1\\_v6.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/act_part1_v6.pdf)

## **4. Recommendations concerning options for developing and adapting the measure/ interventions to the national context**

The analysis of the questionnaire results revealed that the assessed countries are in slightly different stages of readiness regarding further promotion of GI, while the hierarchy of their priorities also differ to some extent. Consequently, this chapter is meant to lay out the analysed countries' options for developing and adapting the measures / interventions to their national context.

Thus, for Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, which have a stronger technical readiness and institutional capacity, increasing the level of awareness of the value of ecological connectivity and need for sectoral integration has the potential of unlocking key decisions for the future funding of GI. In this context, TA funds (under CAP and Cohesion Policy) and AKIS (in case of CAP funds) should include broad awareness campaigns (e.g. through classic and social media and the education system), as well as specific campaigns targeting key official bodies, through dedicated events such as conferences and seminars.

Bulgaria and Romania, however, would firstly need to prioritise official identification and designation of their ecological corridors. Nevertheless, the review of existing studies (in those countries that already have them, such as the Czech Republic and Hungary) and methodologies for ecological corridor delineation should not be neglected.

Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary already have a relatively strongly interlinked networks of motorways, making it a priority for them to promote wildlife crossings on existing infrastructure. This highlights the need for specific studies and monitoring of the existing EU-funded

construction projects that demonstrate the benefits of securing new GI investments for existing transportation infrastructure.

On the other hand, Bulgaria and Romania are currently at the stage of expanding their motorway networks. In their case, it is therefore more important to ensure that new investments include wildlife crossings from the beginning of their design. This means more rigorous environmental impact assessment processes and the need of having specific programmes requests to push for technical designs addressing the topic. At the same time, the beneficiaries should be encouraged to propose GI measures (which may seem costly<sup>3</sup> and extra-time consuming) by implementing a selection system that provides the right incentives.

Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia, have large populations of wild animals that are key to European conservation efforts, and thus have strong arguments to promote various types of GI. Awareness in this regard should be explicitly promoted in the relevant programme chapters (the chapter for analysis and the identification of needs).

Mountain areas – for establishing wildlife crossings and the Danube River Basin and nearby plains / other wetlands – for ecological restoration of wetlands should generally be considered focus areas for all CEE countries.

## **5. Recommendations for promoting the measures/ interventions at country/ local level**

The recommendations featured in this report are prepared to be applicable for the 2021 – 2027 EU funded programmes. It is more efficient to influence the content of future funding programmes during their elaboration rather than to attempt to modify or adjust them in retrospect.

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<sup>3</sup> Taking into consideration that the cost & benefit analysis do not integrate the value of the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services

The 2021 – 2027 policies shifted towards a more flexible approach, the Programmes/ Strategies requiring the Member States to include fewer details on intervention mechanisms (of the eligibility and selection system), as the achievement of the set targets became more important. It is thus expected that Member States will further develop details for eligibility and selection systems within their national legislative frameworks and this process should be followed by an open consultation as well.