



Transnational Experience Exchange Workshop Report

Bulgaria

**Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation
Black Sea NGO Network**

11–12 May 2022

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Workshop participants in Rila Hotel, Dupnitsa, Rila-Verila-Kraishte Pilot Area © Petko Tzvetkov, BBF

1. Introduction

From 11th to 13th of May, the SaveGREEN consortium organised the first event in its series of Transnational Experience Exchange Workshops. The workshop happened in Rila-Verila-Kraishte Pilot Area, which is situated in the Dupnitsa Valley, flanked by the Rila and Verila mountain ranges and the Kraishte region south-west of Sofia, and drained by the Struma River and its tributaries.

The event was organised by the Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation and the Black Sea Network of NGOs in cooperation with the Executive Forest Agency and South-West State Enterprise (Forestry).

The workshop, which took place both online and on-site at the Rila Hotel in Dupnitsa, was attended by 27- the Day 1st and 26 – the Day 2nd participants on-site from the project partners from Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Bulgaria, as well as relevant as well as associate project partners and stakeholders such as the Ministry of Environment and Waters in Bulgaria, the Southwestern State Enterprise (Forestry), the Road Infrastructure Agency, and the Municipality of Dupnitsa. Colleagues from Ukrainian partner organisation managed to join during the online sessions together with other participants from PPs who could not join onsite.

The aim of the transnational event was to present the state of ecological connectivity in Bulgaria to a team of experts working on the topic in their own respective countries and to provide opportunities for discussion and exchange of experience on proposed mitigation measures and solutions presented in a draft of the Cross-Sectoral Operational Plan (CSOP) for the pilot area of the Rila-Verila-Kraishte eco-corridor.

The Associated Strategic Partners and stakeholders had the chance to meet and discuss the hot-topic problems, network, and declare their commitment to the

project's aim to protect the ecological corridors for biodiversity conservation purposes.

Attendees arrived to Dupnitsa the previous day - on the 10th of May from different countries of the project target area. After arrival and registration, they had a dinner on behalf of the host Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation.

2. Workshop Summary

2.1. Day 1

The first day of the workshop was dedicated to a detailed presentation of the pilot area. The event was opened with welcoming words by the hosts of the event - Petko Tzvetkov from Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (BBF) and Emma Gileva from Black Sea NGO Network and also by the Project Manager Hildegard Meyer from WWF Central and Eastern Europe as well as ing. Alyosha Dakov, Deputy Director of SWSE. They expressed their wish for fruitful discussions and emphasized the importance of sharing experience and knowledge between experts and stakeholders from each sector which have an effect on ecological connectivity and green infrastructure development.

The first presentation was made by Hildegard Meyer from WWF Central and Eastern Europe who made a brief SaveGREEN project overview. The following presentation was made by Andrey Kovachev from the Ministry of Environment and Waters, who summarised the importance of Natura 2000 conservation priorities and objectives and the challenges of providing ecological connectivity in Bulgaria and in the pilot area of Rila-Verila Kraishite. After Andrey Kovatchev, Vanya Kamenova and Rosen Mirchev from the Southwestern State Enterprise provided a review of the forest and wildlife management practices in the area.

Nina Stoilova from Road Infrastructure Agency described the results from an assessment of the effectiveness of defragmentation facilities on Struma Motorway made in the period of 2017-2020.

The closing presentation for the day was given by Elena Tsingarska, BBF, who summed the conclusions of BBF experts who have monitored the bottleneck area within the Pilot Area of Rila-Verila-Kraishite. The results showed that the construction of the motorway defragmentation facilities, especially the overpass for large mammals and the non-specialised viaduct are functioning but has got significant drawbacks.

Presentation: SaveGREEN Brief Project Overview

- Current status of SaveGREEN Project implementation

Hildegard Mayers, WWF CEE, Austria

Presentation: N2000 and providing ecological connectivity in South West Bulgaria, conservation priorities and objectives, natural features & bottleneck areas

Andrey Kovatchev, Adviser to the Minister of Environment and Waters, Bulgaria

- Overview of the region
- Natura 2000 network in South-West Bulgaria, defining conservation priorities and objectives
- Existing bio-corridors, bottlenecks and challenges of providing connectivity in the region

Presentation: Forest Management in Rila-Verila-Kraishte Pilot Area

Vanya Kamenova, SWSE

- Overview of the Structure and functions of South-West State Enterprise (Forestry)
- Implementation of the forestry and hunting management plans, as well as maintenance and/or restoration activities in the state-owned forests
- Activities for protection and conservation of the forest territories and anti-erosion measures in the state-owned forests

Presentation: Wildlife and Game Species Population in Rila-Verila-Kraishte Pilot Area,

Rossen Mirchev, SWSE

- Presentation of wildlife biodiversity and information of selected game and large carnivore species populations
- Key Protected areas and N2000 sites

Presentation: Impact of Struma Motorway on selected wildlife populations and effectiveness assessment of defragmentation facilities in the period of 2017-2020

- Results from an effectiveness assessment of defragmentation facilities on Struma Motorway
- Existing bio-corridors
- Determination of model and target species

Nina Stoilova, Road Infrastructure Agency

- Determination of structural & functional connectivity of habitats along the Motorway
- Effectiveness of defragmentation facilities

Presentation: Monitoring permeability of defragmentation facilities on Struma Motorway, Section 1, Rila-Verila-Kraishte Pilot Area

Elena Tsingarska, BBF

- Methodologies applied and challenges
- Preliminary results of monitoring of 3 types of existing defragmentation facilities – overpass, viaduct and underpass

After a lunch at the restaurant of the hotel the attendees went to the first field visit of the Transnational Workshop - Section 1 of Struma Motorway (Dolna Dikanya – Dupnitsa). The workshop participants visited the overpass for large mammals and underpass for large and medium size mammals and the nonspecialised viaduct. There they identified shortcomings of the facilities and discussed possible improvements in them.



Discussions during the field trip to defragmentation facilities on Struma Motorway, Section 1, Rila-Verila-Kraishte Pilot Area © Petko Tzvetkov, BBF

2.2. Day 2

The following day, BBF project coordinator Petko Tzvetkov presented the Cross sectoral operation plan (CSOP) for the Rila-Verila-Kraishte Pilot Area. Project partners shared their insights on similar defragmentation measures in their home countries and suggested the following measures:

- Raise the height and improve the maintenance of fences on both sides of the highway to prevent medium and large-sized predators and ungulates from breaching the barriers so easily.
- Take measures to reduce noise pollution at the facilities, especially the non-specialised viaduct.
- Reduce areas of excessive openness along the overpass and other facilities through additional afforestation and appropriate vegetation for wild animals.

Presentation: Presentation of draft Cross Sectoral Operational Plan (CSOP) for Rila-Verila-Kraishte PA and discussions on proposed measures and solutions. With a focus on needed improvements of already implemented defragmentation measures

Petko Tzvetkov, BBF

- establish regulations over the access of defragmentation facilities (off-roading through overpasses, etc.)
- mitigation of impact of parallel transport infrastructure like regional road not addressed by the implemented measures
- providing proper land management in adjacent areas – forestry and agriculture.
- Cooperation between different stakeholders: institutions, NGOs and local communities.

Following the presentation and fruitful discussions the second field trip in the workshop led to Section 3 of Struma Motorway (Kresna Gorge), where alternative solutions are needed to minimise harmful impacts on the area's rich store of biodiversity and natural features.

Kresna Gorge is a place of exceptional species diversity determined by its relief and location where Mediterranean and Continental climate meet. It is a valuable part of the NATURA 2000 network. The area and its rich biodiversity are threatened by the construction of Struma Motorway through the area. Alternative solutions are under discussion between the Government, NGOs, local communities and the European

Commission for 25 years already. The case is under monitoring of the Bern Convention.



Fieldtrip to the Kresna gorge on day 2 of the workshop © Elena Tsingarska, BBF

The 2-day workshop allowed the SaveGREEN and visiting experts to learn more about the current state of ecological connectivity in Bulgaria, as well as the country's most pressing challenges in this respect, and gave them the opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas for possible solutions from their home countries.

The experts and national institutions also debated the need for ecological corridors to be included at the design and construction stages of newly established transport infrastructure, the lack of legislation in most of the countries regarding ecological connectivity, and other important issues.

Media coverage

After the event a press release was prepared and sent to national and regional media. The press release and interviews, connected to workshop were published in 25 articles and interviews in 22 regional and national media.

3. Appendix

3.1. Agenda of BG Transnational Workshop

| Date | What | Comments |
|--------------------|--|---|
| 10 May 2022 | | |
| 18.00 | Arrival of participants at Rila Hotel, Dupnitsa town, Bulgaria | Easy to reach from Sofia (including public transport bus/train and car) or from South by car. If known early in advance organised transport would be provided |
| 19.00 | Casual dinner, get together | Hotel Rila, Dupnitsa |
| 11 May 2022 | | |
| 9.00 | Arrival of participants, registration | |
| 9.30 | Welcome & intro to the workshop | WWF CEE, South-West State Forestry Enterprise (Forestry) SWSFE, BBF&BSNN |
| 9.30 – 11.00 | Introduction of the region, problems & stakeholder involvement: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SaveGREEN Brief Project Overview N2000 and providing ecological connectivity in South West Bulgaria, conservation priorities and objectives, natural features&bottleneck areas, Forest Management in Rila-Verila-Kraishte Pilot Area | Plenary session with speakers from the region: Hildegard Mayers WWF CEE Andrey Kovatchev, Adviser to the Minister of Environment and Waters, MoEW Vanya Kamenova, South-West State Forest Enterprise Hybrid participation and interpretation in Bulgarian and English will be provided! |
| 11.00-11.20 | Coffee break | |
| 11.20-12.30 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wildlife and Game Species Populations in Rila-Verila-Kraishte Pilot Area Impact of Struma Motorway on selected wildlife populations and effectivenessassessment of defragmentation facilities in the period of 2017-2020; Monitoring permeability of defragmentation facilities on Struma Motorway, Section 1, Rila-Verila-Kraishte Pilot Area Moderated discussions | Rossen Mirchev, South-West State Forest Enterprise Nina Stoilova, Road Infrastructure Agency Elena Tsingarska, BBF |

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| 12.30 – 13.30 | Lunch break | |
| 13.45 – 18.00 | Field trip to LOT1 Struma Motorway (Dolna Dikanya-Dupnitsa), Rila-Verila-Kraishte Pilot Area, overpass for large mammals and underpass for large and mediumsize mammals and nonspecialised viaduct <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intro to the area and functioning of defragmentation measures • Presentation of the monitoring results | Defragmentation measures and weaknesses, monitoring results etc. Comparison of different defragmentation measures undertaken and assessment of the surrounding. Participants will be guided by the staff of BBF |
| 18.30 | Return to Dupnitsa and dinner | Hotel Rila, Dupnitsa |
| 12 May 2022 | | |
| 9.00 – 11.00 | <p>Presentation of draft Cross Sectoral Operational Plan (CSOP) for Rila-Verila-Kraishte PA and discussions on proposed measures and solutions. With a focus on needed improvements of already implemented defragmentation measures.</p> <p>Key issues: establish regulations over the access of defragmentation facilities (offroading through overpasses, etc.), mitigation of impact of parrallel transport infrastructure like regional road not addressed by the implemented measures, poviding proper land management in adjacent areas – forestry and agriculture.</p> <p>Cooperation between different stakeholders: institutions, NGOs and local communities.</p> <p>Discusions over the specific measures. Input from project partners and international expert</p> | <p>Presentations by:</p> <p>Petko Tzvetkov, BBF and other experts</p> <p>Discusions over the specific measures. Input from project partners and international expert (PPs and IENE network experts participation would be very welcome etc.)</p> |
| 11.00-11.20 | Coffee break | |
| 11.20-12.30 | <p>Discusions over the specific measures. Input from project partners and international experts. (continuation)</p> <p>Conclusions and recommendations</p> | |
| 12.30 – 13.30 | Lunch | |
| 13.30 – 18.30 | <p>Field visit to LOT 3 Struma Motorway (Kresna gorge) presentation of natural features and challenges, planned defragmentation measures. Example of future construction discission on the already drafted conclusions.</p> <p>Kresna Gorge is a place of exceptional species diversity determined by its relief and location where Mediterranean and</p> | Participation of international expert, e.g. from PPs and IENE network would be very welcome |

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| | Continental climate meet. It is a valuable part of the NATURA 2000 network. The area and its rich biodiversity are threatened by the construction of Struma Motorway through the area. Alternative solutions are under discussion between the Government, NGOs, local communities and the European Commission for 25 years already. The case is under monitoring of the Bern Convention. | |
| 18.30 | Closing remarks | |
| 19.00 | Dinner | Hotel Rila, Dupnitsa |
| 13 May 2022 | | |
| 9.00 | Departure | |
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