

OSCE Economic and Environmental Committee Meeting

“Biodiversity and security - Security implications of environmental degradation, including reduced biodiversity”.

Presentation of Dr Dmitry Iordanidi, Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina

Wednesday, 14 April 2021

Zoom

- Excellencies, colleagues,
- It is a great honour to be addressing the OSCE Economic and Environmental Committee on the important and timely topic of biodiversity and security and to briefly present the activities of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina in this field.
- As anyone who has visited can attest, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country of truly outstanding natural beauty. Straddling different geological and climatic regions, Bosnia and Herzegovina is blessed with emerald rivers, snowcapped mountains, spectacular canyons and waterfalls, and even one of the last remaining primeval forests in Europe. By the way I use this occasion to invite you to visit BiH as soon as the epidemiological situation will allow such trips and to see beauty of this country – and also to see what the OSCE is doing here on the second dimension.
- This diverse landscape is home to more than 250 ecosystems and unique habitats as well as a number of endemic and relict plant and animal species.
- Although important from both a European and global conservation perspective, Bosnia and Herzegovina’s rich biodiversity is sadly facing a number of threats, including waste mismanagement, pollution, climate change, illegal logging and deforestation and the over-exploitation of resources. Also terrible flood in 2014 with dozens of victims provoked inter-alia by very poor management of rivers’ banks, gravel extraction etc. which proves that in XXI century many natural disasters could be prevented if there would not be a social disaster behind.
- Rivers, the real jewel in BiH’s rich topography, are facing numerous challenges in the form of wastewater discharge, illegal dumping, sand and gravel extraction and the unsustainable construction of small and mini-hydropower plants. The resulting habitat losses are not only endangering numerous fish species and other forms of river life, but also threatening local communities who depend on river ecosystems for their livelihoods and drinking water.

- Indeed, the degradation of rivers and disregard for biodiversity has the potential to cause unrest as witnessed in August 2017 when local citizens - mainly women - attempted to block access to the construction site of a mini-hydropower plant on the Kruščica River. The resistance of the “Brave Women of Kruščica”, as they are now known, inspired many other local communities and activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina to peacefully oppose the planned construction of over 400 small and mini-hydropower plants across the country.
- Through its cross dimensional work, the Mission pays close attention to the security implications of environmental degradation, including reduced biodiversity, and strongly recognizes the importance of biodiversity protection in achieving sustainable economic development.
- As vital sources of independence and expertise, the Mission-supported network of Aarhus Centres in BiH continue to be crucial partners for advancing environmental co-operation and civil society involvement. With capacity-building and advocacy support from the Mission, the Aarhus Centres have successfully led civil society efforts to protect the country’s rivers from the proliferation of mini-hydropower plants, recently resulting in the adoption of landmark decisions on river protection by entity parliaments.
- Of course, awareness is the first step to action. For this reason, the Mission continues to raise awareness amongst the public, and young people in particular, on the importance of environmental protection and biodiversity conservation. Recently the Mission supported school fieldtrips to nature and bird reserves and assisted biology students from BiH and Serbia in jointly mapping the biodiversity of a former illegal dumpsite on the outskirts of the City of Bijeljina. With Mission support, schoolchildren in Srebrenica are producing “leave no trace” signs for the Guber Park, an area that is renowned for its biodiversity and the health benefits of its drinking water. We also continue to support locally-driven clean-up campaigns in communities struggling with littering and illegal dumping, helping citizens take direct action in protecting biodiversity.
- We are also strengthening public awareness of biodiversity through our work with museums. Currently we are assisting the National Museum of BiH in reconstructing its natural sciences permanent exhibition, which was heavily damaged during the 1992-1995 conflict. Once completed in spring next year, the exhibition will serve as an important resource for citizens, and particularly young people, to learn about the country’s rich array of flora and fauna and the importance of conservation. The project builds on a similar initiative implemented with the Museum of *Republika Srpska* in 2017. Like that initiative, the current project is being made possible through close collaboration and the sharing of expertise between the two museums, evidence that biodiversity can provide a fertile common ground for co-operating across administrative lines.
- The Mission is also helping to protect biodiversity by assisting the introduction of environmentally friendly agricultural techniques in rural communities. At the end of last year, the Mission, together with NGO Centre for Peacebuilding, pioneered an online

training on permaculture methods for local growers in the remote municipality of Šekovići. The approach, which emphasizes the importance of working with nature and protecting biodiversity by reducing waste and not using artificial pesticides and fertilizers, was well received by the participants and is now being put into practice. The Mission is planning to extend this to Serb and Bosniak former civilian war detainees' associations in nearby Bratunac, also assisting the associations in establishing a joint Seed Bank with a focus on traditional and local seeds.

- The link between biodiversity protection and economic opportunity also informs the Mission's work in fostering sustainable tourism. In the northwest of the country, we are supporting a collective of mountaineering associations from five neighbouring municipalities in marking, maintaining and promoting hiking trails, putting appreciation for nature and its protection at the heart of local development. Similarly, Mission support to five municipalities in the mountainous Majevisa region has helped to strengthen inter-ethnicity and inter-municipal co-operation on the environment and biodiversity. So far, Mission support has resulted in the production of a joint project proposal for clearing landmines and now the municipalities are working together to obtain equipment for onsite sorting of waste, two activities, which, when realized, will make a significant contribution to biodiversity protection.
- Finally, we are also supporting improved management of the land and environment through our Disaster Risk Reduction activities. I am happy to report that the Mission-supported Disaster Risk Assessment Document of Bosnia and Herzegovina fully recognizes that the sustainable use and management of ecosystems and natural resources are essential for the prevention of disasters.
- Your excellencies, dear colleagues, I hope that I have managed to provide you with a brief overview of our current activities in this important area. I look forward to answering any questions you might have.