



## Press Briefing

### **Alliance of NGOs claims freedom instead of strangulation for the Danube in Croatia**

- Transboundary Biosphere Reserve (TBR) "Mura-Drava-Danube": Croatian-Hungarian part due to be designated by UNESCO in July 2012
- Yet Croatia's Water Management lobby pushes river regulation; plans severely threaten TBR heartland
- Hungary recently stopped large scale river regulation plans in the country's part of TBR (Danube-Drava)
- European Commission currently investigating Croatia's regulation plans; report is due soon
- Complaints to positive Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Study and project still pending; final decision imminent taken by Croatian Ministry for Environment and Nature Protection

Osijek/Croatia, June 19th, 2012 – More than 50 kilometres of the entire Danube's best preserved floodplain areas shall soon fall victim to devastating and illegitimate regulation measures, an alliance of international and Croatian NGOs warned in Osijek today. Affected is the region between the Croatian village of Batina and the confluence of the Danube and the Drava at Aljmaš, including the world famous Nature Park "Kopački rit" in Croatia, bordering Serbia. A group of journalists, representing major European media is currently visiting this area to get a first-hand impression of the natural values at stake.

WWF, EuroNatur, Green Osijek and the Croatian Society for the Protection of Birds and Nature, getting to the point today, at a press conference in Zlatna Greda, Croatia, in Green Osijek's (NGO) Eco-Center: *"The free flowing meandering Danube river is due to be squeezed into a corset of 53 hard blocks and heavy embankments, massively threatening vast species-rich wetlands of 500 square kilometres."*

The area in the Croatian-Serbian-Hungarian triangle is a paradise for about 300 bird species such as the White-tailed eagle and the Black Stork, many mammals like beaver and otter, amphibians and reptile species. Beside the Danube delta, it is also the river's most important fish spawning site and hosts rarities like the nearly extinct Ship Sturgeon.

Moreover the affected area is scheduled to become the heartland of Europe's largest protected river area. Spanning Austria, Hungary, Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia, the so called "Amazon of Europe" will cover 800.000 hectares of valuable riverine natural and cultural landscape.

#### Protection or destruction: A landmark decision

The Croatian Agency for Inland Waterways emphatically propagates its plans to force the Danube into a channelized river-bed, disregarding all devastating ecological consequences - and ignoring Croatia's commendable efforts to establish international protection of the area.

Croatia and Hungary share the biggest part (80 percent) of the future 5-country TBR "Mura-Drava-Danube". Less than a year ago in September 2011 – following the nomination by Hungary in 2009 – the Croatian Ministry of Environment and Nature Protection nominated the now heavily threatened Kopački rit wetlands as a core zone of the Transboundary Biosphere Reserve. Still in July 2012, the mutual Croatian-Hungarian part of the Biosphere Reserve is expected to gain officially international protection status by UNESCO.

#### Outrageous: Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Study approves project

Since October 2011 the Croatian Ministry of Environment and Nature Protection is assessing the environmental impacts (EIA) of the channelling project. In February 2012 the EIA study, prepared by the same firm who designed the project, concluded that a channelling of the Danube *"would not have significant impacts on the environment and can be considered as acceptable"* - what an imposition, given the fact that this is a blatant distortion of facts!

#### River channeling: An erroneous and antiquated practice

Any regulation of the Danube would deepen the natural riverbed and water levels would subside – with all the irreversible consequences for nature, wildlife, and scenery, but also affecting forestry, agriculture, and the supply of drinking water. *"The plan to dry out Kopački rit is the biggest threat to Croatia's wetlands for thirty years"*, warns Tibor Mikuska, conservation expert at Croatian Society for the Protection of Birds and Nature. The ornithologist coordinates the network of "Riverwatchers" who keep an eye on every transgression that might be harmful for the rivers.

All things considered, the environmental NGOs conclude that the water management lobbies in Croatia want to exploit a possible EIA approval to squeeze profit from an ultimately technically and economically useless, even counterproductive project. Croatian and international NGOs like WWF, EuroNatur and Justice and Environment, therefore lodged a complaint against the EIA and regulation project with the Ministry for Environment and Nature Protection. *"The EIA conclusion is entirely unfounded, of extremely low quality, flawed and does not properly assess the environmental impacts of the project. It would never stand any serious review by independent experts"*, states Mikuska.

#### Touchstone for Mihael Zmajlović, new Minister of Environment

Arno Mohl, WWF's International Freshwater Expert, says: *"If Croatia – one year before its accession to the EU- takes EU law seriously, there is no other way for the new Minister Mihael Zmajlović, but to immediately reject the Danube regulation project."* Petra Boic Petrac from the WWF Mediterranean Programme Office in Zagreb, endorsing Mohl's statement: *"If our minister Zmajlović would promote the Danube regulation project, he counteracts his own ministry's efforts for a better protection of the unique Kopački rit area. We really trust that the ministry sticks to its commitments and decides in favor of the unique river landscape. Otherwise, the international protection status will not be worth the paper it is written on it."*

Croatia's EU-Accession at hand, her environmental performance is put to the test. This opinion is confirmed by the fact that the European Commission currently screens the project for any possible infringement of relevant EU rules and regulations. A respective report to the Croatian government is due soon.

NGOs anticipate that the European Commission will confirm and strengthen their commitment to prevent irreversible damage to Europe's natural treasures.

What was considered reasonable for the Drava should also apply to the Danube  
In 2009, an assessment of a fully comparable regulation project on the Lower Drava River at Osijek was conducted by the European Commission. Independent EU experts then rejected it because they found that it was outdated, destructive and simply non-compliant with EU law and international environmental standards. The experts recommended to start a new river development project in compliance with EU law and international standards.

*"Like we did in the case of the Drava river, we're keeping EU officials informed about the state of play of the channelling project on the Danube. The Ministry's performance will prove how far it is prepared to stick to its own commitments and to properly implement EU law and modern environmental standards", says Mohl. "An approval by Minister Zmajlović might lead to political implications as to Croatia's EU ambitions", he adds.*

Fatal consequences for the Danube in Serbia

Croatia's decision as to the regulation project will have enormous trans-boundary environmental impacts to the Special Nature Reserve "Gornje Podunavlje", an ecological important area in Serbia adjacent to Kopački rit. Moreover, the approval of Croatia's EIA would be setting a negative precedent for the plans to channel the meandering Danube stretch in Serbia.

*"In Serbia, the Danube faces similar threats. Currently we started discussions with Plovput, the Directorate for Inland Waterways, to avoid environmental destruction due to river regulation along the almost 220 kilometres of the Danube in Serbia", says Duska Dimovic, WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme representative in the country. "If Croatia approves the project we fear that it will boost destructive plans in Serbia", Dimovic warns.*

Hungary sets a signal for Croatia to reconsider its plans

Whereas Croatia is pushing for further regulation, the Hungarian government has recently stopped the destructive regulation projects on the river Danube, as well as ongoing gravel extraction in its part of "Europe's Amazon", on the river Drava. The Danube-Drava National Park's wetland areas, of about 50.000 hectares, are part of the core zone of the future Transboundary Biosphere Reserve. Its designation by UNESCO, jointly with the Croatian areas, is expected to be in July 2012. This step from Hungary is an important signal for Croatia to reconsider its plans, believes WWF Hungary.

*This decision creates the right momentum now also in Hungary to go further on with river restoration projects and reduce to the minimum the harmful human activities on the river", says Gábor Figezky from WWF Hungary. "It would be absurd if Croatia right at this moment pushed for further the destruction of the trans-boundary area whereas Hungary just stepped back."*

Better to fit the ships to the rivers, than the rivers to the ships

The official purpose of the river channelling is to increase navigation and flood protection. However NGOs believe that such heavy technical intervention is not only unnecessary, but counterproductive. *"This project means an enormous waste of public money and will only benefit a small group of profiteers", Dinko Pešić, conservationist of Green Osijek is convinced. "Our citizens will be left with an old and damaging water management infrastructure and it is our environment that will be destroyed."*

Borut Stumberger, conservation expert of EuroNatur assists: *"We are not going to accept the destruction of the core zone of this designated protected area that is for good reason referred to as "the Amazon of Europe."* Together with WWF and many other NGOs, EuroNatur was successfully pushing for the protection of the unique riverine area by a five-country-UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. *"There is a sharp contrast between the regulation plans and the aim of the EU to stop loss of biodiversity in Europe"*, Stumberger adds.

A petition to save the Amazon of Europe can be signed on [www.amazon-of-europe.com](http://www.amazon-of-europe.com)

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