





National protected area systems in the new EU Member States: transitioning from post-Soviet legacies to Natura 2000

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### Outline

- Regional context and relevant history milestones
- Legal and institutional frameworks
- Setting up and implementation
- Administrative capacity
- Coordination across sectors
- Public and stakeholders
- Funding mechanisms
- Challenges, successes, lessons learned





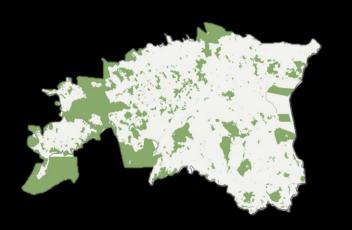


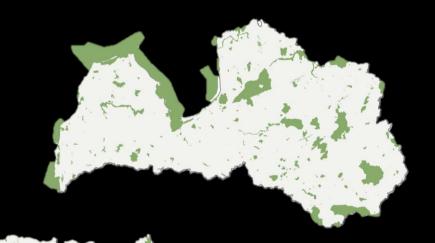
#### Context

- Why focus on Central Europe and the Baltics:
  - Post-communist transition from 1990
  - EU accession drives nature protection reforms
  - Still notable differences within the region and with the EaP countries
- Establishment of Natura 2000:
  - key milestone
  - site designation process challenges
  - o implementation aspects, challenges, successes

#### Estonia

- Total area: 45,326 km<sup>2</sup>
- Number of Natura 2000 sites: 567
- Land area covered by Natura 2000: 17.9%





#### Latvia

- Total area: 64,586 km<sup>2</sup>
- Number of Natura 2000 sites: 333
- Land area covered by Natura 2000: 11.5%

#### Lithuania

- Total area: 64,899 km<sup>2</sup>
- Number of Natura 2000 sites: 710
- Land area covered by Natura 2000: 14.0%

#### Poland

- Total area: 311,928 km<sup>2</sup>
- Number of Natura 2000 sites: 1003
- Land area covered by Natura 2000: 19.6%

#### Hungary



- Total area: 93,013 km<sup>2</sup>
- Number of Natura 2000 sites: 525
- Land area covered by Natura 2000: 21.4%



#### Slovenia



- Total area: 20,267 km<sup>2</sup>
- Number of Natura 2000 sites: 355
- Land area covered by Natura 2000: 37.9%





- Total area: 56,434 km<sup>2</sup>
- Number of Natura 2000 sites: 783
- Land area covered by Natura 2000: 36.7%

#### Czech Republic



- Total area: 78,874 km<sup>2</sup>
- Number of Natura 2000 sites: 1153
- Land area covered by Natura 2000: 14.1%

#### Slovakia



- Total area: 49,026 km<sup>2</sup>
- Number of Natura 2000 sites: 685
- Land area covered by Natura 2000: 30.0%

#### Romania



- Total area: 238,369 km<sup>2</sup>
- Number of Natura 2000 sites: 606
- Land area covered by Natura 2000: 22.7%





#### Bulgaria



- Total area: 110,994 km<sup>2</sup>
- Number of Natura 2000 sites: 340
- Land area covered by Natura 2000: 34.9%







### Common and distinct features

- Communist-era: centralised, top-down governance
- Post-1990: rapid legal and institutional reforms
- Natura 2000 introduced new conservation paradigm
- Baltic countries:
  - Rapid legal reform postindependence (early 90s)
  - Smaller populations, fewer development pressures
  - Nordic aid influential in capacity building

- Central Europe:
  - Stronger administrative starting point, larger capacities
  - Larger-scale conflicts (infrastructure, forestry)
  - Earlier traditions of nature conservation (Hungary, Czechia)







# A little on [Baltic] nature protection history\*

Period	Key characteristics	Types of protected areas
Ancient Baltic	Worship of nature, its phenomena and objects	Traditionally protected sacred forests and groves, trees, springs, rocks or other natural objects
Feudal	Consumerism. Forests reserved for hunting purposes (game reserves)	Network of noblemen's game reserves – forests where all other uses were prohibited
1 <sup>st</sup> part of XX century (pre-WWII)	Emerging need to protect nature and culture, preserve rare objects, driven by both national pride and scientific interests	First strict nature reserves (Vaika Islands 1910, Moricsala 1912, Žuvintas 1937), followed by protected forests, alleys, parks, and nature monuments.
Soviet rule	Foundation of the current network of protected areas, driven by science and hunters, also by national pride	Network of first nature reserves expanded – first with game reserves, from 1960s – with nature reserves, national parks, nature monuments, basing on scientific interests and conservation goals
Present	Chaotic developments of 1990s took shape and became meaningful with the beginning of EU accession and further implementation of acquis communautaire	Fully developed system of protected areas broadly based on IUCN categories, but slightly different in each country.  National protected areas largely overlap with Natura 2000 network

<sup>\*</sup> adapted from <a href="https://vstt.lrv.lt/en/about-protected-areas/the-history-of-evolution/">https://vstt.lrv.lt/en/about-protected-areas/the-history-of-evolution/</a> by State Service for Protected Areas under the Ministry of Environment of Lithuania









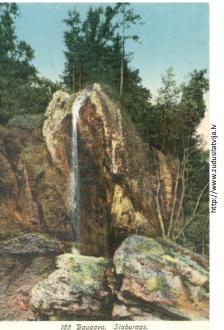
# A little on Baltic nature protection history (2)



1935: Estonian nature conservation law. By 1941: a total of 523 nature conservation areas and individual natural objects, in addition to 26 protected species

Žuvintas Reserve established in 1937





Before 1940: 2 nature reserves and numerous protected forests, alleys (475 km), parks (2700 ha), and nature monuments (2200 ha)









# Legal and institutional frameworks

New conservation laws in all countries (1990s-2000s)

Comprehensive nature conservation legislation developed to replace Soviet-era or socialist laws; protected areas networks expanded. For example, 12 of the 15 national parks across the Baltics were created after 1990. Land restitution: ownership from state to mixed; some countries retained state ownership in core areas

Legal frameworks strengthened during EU pre-accession

The legal basis for protected areas was strengthened and modernised during the EU pre-accession period (early 2000s) to meet the acquis communautaire

Institutions restructured for Natura 2000

Countries set up or update agencies for nature protection, in some cases decentralised (PL, SI) or under different authorities (BG).







## Natura 2000 implementation

Natura 2000 greatly expanded protected areas coverage

The Baltic countries treated Natura 2000 as an extension of their national PA systems, integrating many existing parks/reserves and adding new areas to meet EU habitat criteria. CE countries significantly increased their protected areas through Natura 2000 – often doubling or tripling the area under protection compared to 1990.

• Initial networks set quickly (2004–2007), but incomplete

Coverage varied from 11% to 35+% due to ecological differences and initial political choices. Some did it right from the start (CZ, EE), some needed EC's intervention (PL), rushed process in SI lead to an excellent coverage on paper but local backlash

Significant fine-tuning needed post-accession (up to 2009)

Insufficient designation of certain habitats (some were reluctant to include areas planned for development, others got stuck with landowners) and delays in finalising legal protection at the national level







## Administrative capacity

- By mid-2000s all countries had the necessary institutional frameworks in place to designate and manage protected areas, but:
- Administrative capacity behind PA network growth

Before 1990 nature protection was handled by small depts, sometimes academic – transition demanded new govt bodies with adequate staff, skills, and regional reach. Designation of new Natura 2000 sites made things only worse

- Training via EU (PHARE, LIFE) and bilateral support crucial
- Central European countries slightly stronger initially than Baltics







### Coordination across sectors

• Conflicts: infrastructure, forestry, tourism, agriculture

Clashes between nature protection authorities and infrastructure planners, agricultural and forestry stakeholders, municipal governments and landowners over land-use decisions

- Initially weak inter-sectoral coordination led to conflicts
- Gradual improvements

Introduction of mandatory EIA and appropriate assessments in line with the EU requirements resolved most issues in most countries. Some (PL) set up interministerial teams to integrate environmental concerns in spatial planning







### Public and stakeholders

• Public involvement initially limited, leading to local resistance

"Introducing public participation in areas without democratic traditions, where many people are preoccupied with economic survival, is extremely difficult and time-consuming" (WWF)

Rural-urban divide: conservation often urban-driven

Environmental community is mostly urban-based and must work hard to gain the trust of rural landowners

Gradual shift towards stakeholder involvement throughout the region

"Greater involvement of local authorities and other stakeholders is essential for the sustainability of the network" (IUCN). The earlier, the better...







## Funding mechanisms

- Environmental protection funds supported conservation locally, particularly in early development phases
- Bilateral donor funding in 1990s
- National budgets insufficient; heavy reliance on EU funding

E.g. in EE maintaining Natura 2000 network in 2021-2027 needs 17.3 MEUR in annual running costs and 26.2 MEUR in project costs per year

 EU funding – LIFE, structural funds, and rural development funds crucial







## Key implementation challenges

- Pressures from infrastructure development (roads, resorts)
- Forestry conflicts (logging vs conservation)
- Limited enforcement & administrative capacity initially
- Limited national funding
- Sociopolitical resistance to land-use restrictions
- Inconsistent integration of Natura 2000 across sectors



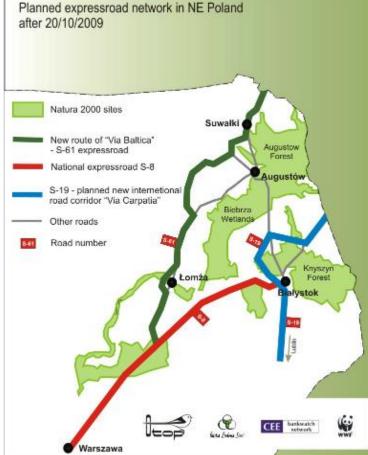




## Case study: Rospuda Valley road conflict —

- Early 2000s: Planned Augustów bypass threatened Rospuda Valley, Poland.
- Proposed road endangered pristine wetlands (Natura 2000 site).
- Widespread protests and legal challenges arose.
- 2009: EU intervention prompted Poland to reroute the bypass.











## Case study: Kaliakra coastal area

- Kaliakra coastal region faced unauthorised developments: illegal wind farms and tourism infrastructure threatened Natura 2000 habitats
- 2016: European Court ruled Bulgaria violated EU environmental laws.
   Court decision highlighted failure to adequately protect biodiversity
- In response some steps were taken by the government, but by far insufficient; case is still being closely monitored by the EC, Council of Europe, and international NGOs









### Key implementation successes

- Rapid expansion of protected areas after independence == == ==
- Extensive stakeholder consultation
- Ambitious Natura 2000 coverage === === ===
- Rospuda Valley preserved through EU intervention
- NGO-government cooperation in Natura 2000 🛌 🚈







### Lessons learned

- EU accession as a key political priority strongly supported improvements in nature protection
- Early and inclusive stakeholder engagement is crucial for developing and sustaining Natura 2000 network
- Adequate administrative capacity is essential for effective nature management
- EU intervention and funding are decisive for conservation outcomes







# Moving forward

Strengthen local capacity and inter-sectoral coordination

Maintain consistent EU funding streams for conservation

Foster urban-rural cooperation in conservation planning



#### **EU4Environment Green Economy in Eastern Partner Countries**













### Sources and further reading

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